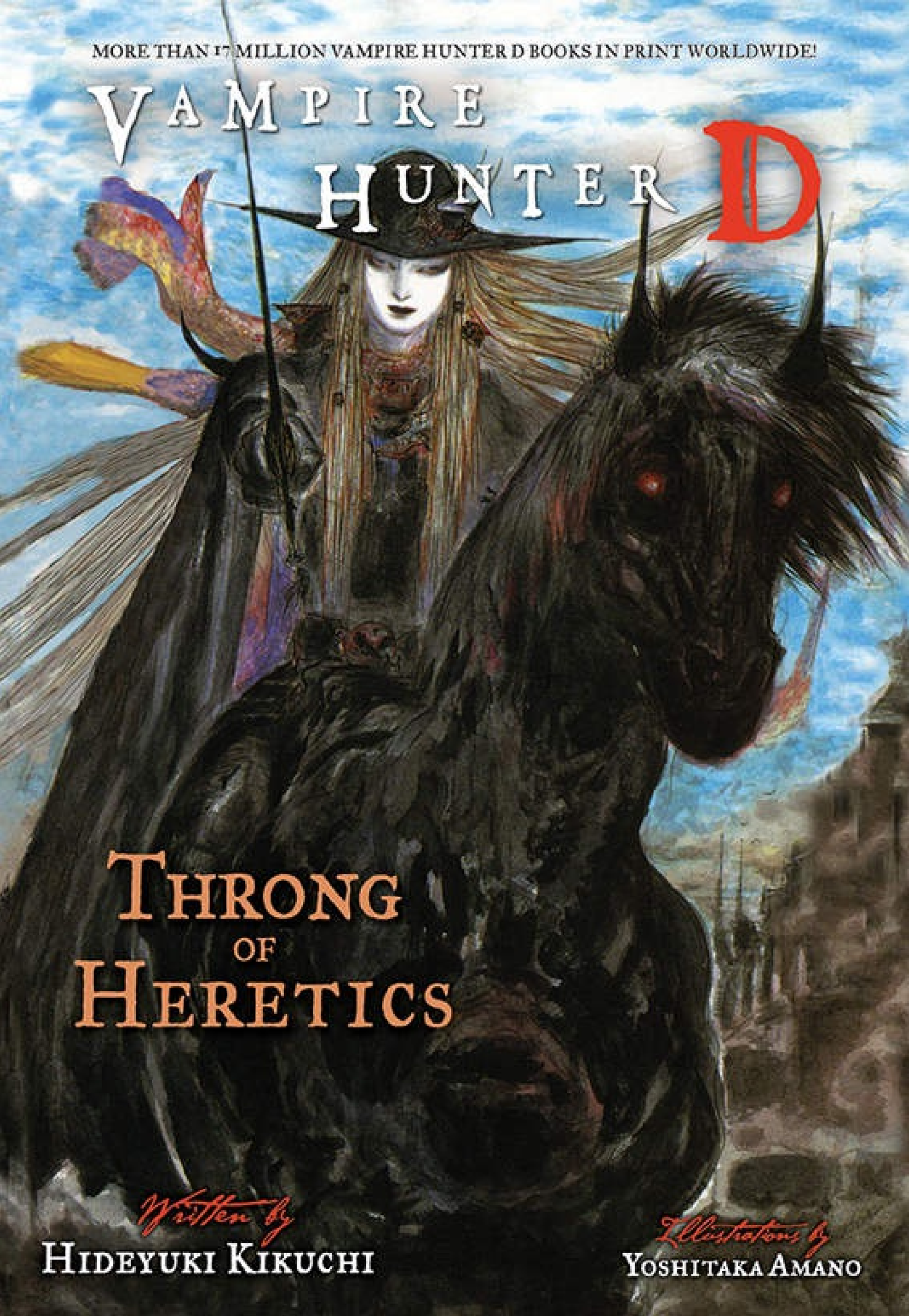
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THRONG OF HERETICS
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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

VOLUME 24

THRONG OF HERETICS

Written by

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VAMPIRE HUNTER D

Throng of Heretics

BLACK EASTER

Chapter 1

I

It had stood there for precisely three hundred years. According to the standard map of the Frontier drawn up by the Bureau of Geography in the Capital, it was located five yards above Point Z-444 and 424. All those years ago, there had been humans who could make use of the Nobility's technology. Perhaps they'd worked in one of the Nobles' science centers or an engineering plaza. All it knew was that precisely three hundred years had passed since it had gone into operation. Even among the descendants of those who'd built it or positioned it in its present location there were few who knew of its existence. Regardless, it rounded out its third century of service.

Staining the edge of a chain of mountain peaks crimson, the sun sank in the west. Suddenly, *it* knew its task was over. The realization came just as the last remnants of redness vanished behind the mountains. Those long years of service were gone, and longer years of the same that should've been yet to come had disappeared as well. It activated the laser transmitter with which it was equipped, beamed a signal that'd been converted to electrical waves to its destination, and awaited the moment of truth.

"Now, I should like to discuss your work, gentlemen, as well as some relevant background," the hoary-headed, silver-bearded old man said to the five men seated before him in wooden chairs, his tone as unsociable as his expression.

Since the town hall had burnt down two days earlier, the saloon that'd once been used as a meeting place had once again been pressed into service, with light flooding its interior. It was an hour past noon.

Though the old man had expected some tension from them, two of the men merely shifted their upper bodies slightly, but the dauntless demeanor of all was unchanged.

"Before we do . . ." The big fat man standing to the right of the older man

spoke in a voice that sounded like he had something caught in his throat. The badge of a village sheriff caught the light from the cheap chandelier. “I’ve already told the mayor something about you, but at any rate, I’d like you to introduce yourselves.”

And saying that, the corpulent figure stroked his badge with plump fingers.

Not only did the men not look at the star, they didn’t even glance at the lawman.

Turning to the aged mayor, the man on the far right practically groaned his introduction. “Leica Slopey.” Both of his ears were weirdly tapered, his mouth was disturbingly large, and the man’s exposed face and hands were oddly hirsute. His longsword had been removed from his belt and rested against his left arm.

“Hiki.”

The second man was terribly thin. So slight of build it looked like a strong breeze might blow him away, he was wrapped in a semitransparent film reminiscent of the wings of a mayfly. All he had for a weapon was the knife on his belt.

“Barry Dawn’s the name,” said the youngest of the five. There was something off-kilter about this man, who had the gentle face of a woman combined with a ferocious physique. Those who saw his face alone would undoubtedly mistake him for a female. The longsword that rested against his left shoulder was longer than any of the others’, and it was in a scabbard that was 90 percent of his nearly six-foot-eight-inch stature.

“They call me the Confessor.”

On hearing the stocky man’s voice, the sheriff looked relieved. Since arriving at the village, he hadn’t said a single word. Had his likeness not been in the Hunter directory, the lawman wouldn’t have known what to do with him. His weapons were a run-of-the-mill short spear and a revolver he wore on his right hip. The bag that hung from his other hip undoubtedly contained ammunition.

“Quake Resden,” the last one said, thick, beard-hedged lips forming a smile.

Unlike the other four, he had an air of normalcy about him. His eyes as well as

his lips were nearly hidden by his scruffy growth of whiskers. He wore a cotton robe that was like a potato sack, and as odd as it may seem, from the waist down it was strung front and back with weights the size of a child's fist. Though it hardly seemed like the average person could even move with them on, he was such a mountain of a man it didn't seem as if it would be an issue for him.

"The lot of you are ranked the greatest Vampire Hunters in the southern Frontier. The fact that you've been at it for more than a decade is proof enough of that. The average life expectancy of a Vampire Hunter is four years in the eastern Frontier, three and a half in the west, two in the north, and in the southern Frontier—considered the most brutal of the bunch—it's only a year and a half."

The corpulent sheriff checked on the mayor with a sidelong glance. It'd been his job to summon the strange collection of men before them. On seeing the mayor nod, he was satisfied.

"Enough about us. Just as long as you know what you're getting. Let's get down to business."

The man named Leica twisted his lips. Though he brimmed with more wildness than any of them, he was also the most lacking in vigor.

Barry Dawn and Quake Resden looked at him from the corners of their eyes and grinned.

Outside, the weather was sunny.

"Ahem," the sheriff said, looking to the mayor. The mayor nodded.

"Five days ago," the old man began, "the regularly scheduled signal from Balsa Hill was interrupted, for the first time in three centuries. There have been no transmissions since. It is our opinion the surveillance system that's been sitting up on top of that hill for the last three hundred years has been destroyed."

Mention of Balsa Hill sent a strange current swirling around the men. A cocktail of seven parts fight, two parts murderous intent. The remaining part they would never admit to. The smallest component, but also the heaviest and most stuporous—fear.

"No one goes near the hill. Even if they did, the surveillance equipment was

built using Noble technology. No human should be able to destroy it. I needn't say any more, I suppose. I trust you can see well enough what your job will entail." Here the mayor paused, running a wily gaze over the Hunters. "Don't tell me some of you are afraid."

As if that were their cue, the five men rose in unison. The whole room rocked. Looking up at the ceiling, the sheriff mumbled something about an earthquake.

The mayor's expression swiftly grew severe, and he said, "I'll be damned—who knew southern Hunters were all a bunch of cowards?"

His scornful words inflicted no harm on the men, crumbling against their garb.

"You know, we might be cowards, but we're not stupid," Barry Dawn said with a shrug of his shoulders. "The ruins of Viscount Xeno's castle are at the top of Balsa Hill. The viscount had a wooden stake driven through his heart by the ancestors of your villagers, and his kin sleep their unholy sleep up there. Looking back on it, it's surprising they could've done something so nervy. Legend has it your ancestors delivered poisoned drink to the wedding reception for the viscount's daughter the night before, then burst in while they were paralyzed and slaughtered the lot. Women, children, servants—it didn't matter. Everyone got staked through the heart and beheaded. It's the one instance where history books in the Capital don't call it a 'battle'; they label it a 'massacre.'"

"Be that as it may, it was a long time ago," the mayor replied, regaining his composure. "No one really knows the truth. The slipshod work of investigators from the Capital is well known. It's my considered opinion that, while they may have been a little out of line and maybe slightly overreacted, the humans waged a just battle against the Nobility."

He ran his gaze over the group without trepidation. Here was a prime display of his authority and oratory powers as the community's leader.

Suddenly, his eyes opened wide. In those eyes of blue, other red ones glowed. His eyes had met those of the man who called himself the Confessor.

As if somewhat drunken, the mayor slurred his speech as he continued, "The villagers, led by my ancestor Dominic Krishken, forced their way into the castle of the Xeno clan. Dominic left a detailed account of that day in his journal. I've read it. As you just said, led by Dominic, the villagers put down Nobles weakened by

poisoned drink, one after another, before they could flee to their graves. Apparently their blood pooled an inch and a half deep on the floor of the great hall. But the most fearsome of the bunch, Viscount Xeno's son and his four cousins, narrowly escaped harm, fleeing to the crypts beneath the castle to slumber. Fearing their vengeance, our ancestors used mining equipment and vast amounts of explosives to level the castle and block the entrance to the crypts with tens of thousands of tons of rubble. They then set a sensor on top of that, to warn us should the five slumbering Nobles awaken. That was three centuries ago. That's a long time. More than enough time for our ancestors to pass away and the villagers to forget all about the Xeno clan. But to the Nobility —to immortals—an hour's probably no different from three centuries or a million years. They're coming. I'm sure of it. Nobles never forgive human insurrections. Particularly one like this where they were blindsided and killed so underhandedly. There's no denying it was a slaughter. Dominic wrote in his journal about how the castle was strewn with the heads and limbs of the Nobles' children . . ."

At that point the mayor put his hand to his brow, his upper body twisting theatrically. Straightening up again, he took his hand from his forehead and slapped it over his mouth in shock, groaning with disbelief, "I . . . er . . . What was I saying?"

"Well, you just gave us proof it wasn't a 'battle,' it was a 'massacre.'" Barry Dawn got a thin grin on his lips. He then looked straight at the Confessor and said, "That's one weird little talent you've got there. Whatever you do, keep it away from me, all right?"

"The Xeno clan was legendary for their cruelty. Various accounts say his son and those four cousins in particular were so cold blooded even other Nobility were afraid of them. If they're fired up for revenge, especially against someone who butchered their kin in such a dastardly way, this won't be any ol' vengeance," said the man who'd identified himself as Hiki. With every word he said, the film he wore swayed like a mirage.

"We're not cowards, and we're not idiots either," Barry Dawn reiterated. "It's times like this you just have to say, 'He who fights and runs away lives to fight another day.' They're just too much to handle."

“Be seeing you,” Leica Slopey said, raising one hand lethargically as he headed for the door.

The other four followed suit.

“Wait!” the mayor shouted, holding out his hand. “If you leave now, I’ll spread word across the whole Frontier that this job scared you off. You’ll never work again!”

Quake Resden shrugged. “Can’t work if we’re dead, either.”

As the warriors shuffled away, behind them the mayor was so mad he could’ve stomped his feet, though he curbed his penury and said, “All right, then. I’ll double your rate—no, triple it!”

The men didn’t halt.

“Damn it, how about four times?”

Leading the pack, Leica was almost to the door.

“Five times?! No, make that—”

“Ten times.”

The men stopped dead. This was exactly what people meant when they talked about being in lockstep.

The focus of the eyes of both the Hunters and the mayor, the sheriff sheepishly inquired, “How about it, Mr. Mayor?”

It was the lawman who had offered them ten times their normal rate.

Knowing there was only one possible answer, the mayor nodded. “Fine—ten times it is.”

“Just one more thing,” said the taciturn giant—Quake Resden. “If one of us gets killed, I want his share to get divvied up between the survivors.”

A strange mood swept over the group. They would benefit directly from the death of their colleagues. A simple and delightful economic facet had been added. It came as little surprise that the sheriff glanced over at the mayor, but the old man said nothing, merely nodding.

The men noisily clopped back to their seats. From the look of things, these

were true professionals.

II

“Five days have passed since the surveillance system was destroyed—that’s too long,” said Hiki. “In the interim, us Hunters have gotten no word of anything happening around Balsa Hill. How about you folks?”

The mayor shook his head.

The sheriff stepped in, saying, “Same here. Jagos is the nearest village to it, but just this morning we got word from their sheriff’s office that nothing was out of the ordinary.”

“By comm bug?” Barry Dawn asked.

“Yep. Why?”

“We can tell just by their voice if someone’s a normal human or a Noble. Or a victim of the Nobility, for that matter.”

“So can I!” the sheriff retorted, puffing his chest, but then his eyes went wide. It was a few seconds before he managed to say, “You don’t mean to tell me . . .”

Comm bugs were insects that would repeat the words they were told. In that respect, they were like parrots. There was no way to tell anything about the person who’d spoken those words to them.

“Don’t tell me the village of Jagos has been—”

“It’s been five days. If those five Nobles set their mind to it, even the most tightly guarded village couldn’t fend them off for a single day.”

“Then the comm bug . . . From one of the villagers they turned . . . ?”

“No doubt. Jagos has a population of roughly two hundred and fifty. That’s more than enough to slake their thirst for blood and yearning for slaughter, and they’d go through them in a day. If they dawdled too long, nearby villages might take notice. We must assume they’ve long since taken leave of the village, leaving behind villagers they fed on. Reports that nothing was out of the ordinary probably came from villagers trying to lure in fresh victims.”

The subject was so horrible, the sheriff made a choking sound.

“Well, where are they, then?”

To the sheriff’s quavering inquiry, Barry replied, “No idea. Could be they’re headed for another, bigger village. As I recall, about a hundred and twenty miles south of Balsa Hill there’s the town of Calico, right? There you’ve got flights to the Capital and regularly scheduled buses. But if I were a blood-starved Noble, the first thing I’d do is attack the nearest village. Once I’d satisfied my craving, I’d head straight out to exact my vengeance. I’d ignore Calico.”

Suddenly the mayor sank. He’d been standing, but he settled into the chair behind him—well, not so much “settled” as “collapsed.” The twitch in his face that rocked his white beard and the vacant look in his eyes announced that he’d realized nothing short of his own fate. Nothing could be crueler.

“My daughter . . . Annette . . . is coming home from the Capital . . . ,” he said as if delirious, squeezing the words through parched lips. “The university’s on holiday . . . This afternoon . . . she’ll be arriving at Calico’s airport . . . Tomorrow, she’ll head back here . . . And *they* know it . . .”

“How?” the sheriff asked, furrowing his brow. He wanted to throw his badge in the trash at about this point.

“Jagos . . . My daughter’s nanny lives in the village . . . I’ve heard she and my daughter still correspond . . . I’m sure she’d know about her vacation plans . . .”

“I see. First, they’ll hit you where it hurts, eh? Tear the daughter of their hated foe limb from limb—no, they’ll probably make her one of them. That would be the ultimate revenge!” the Confessor said with relish, but the mayor didn’t even have the strength to rail at the man.

“Set off at once. First, my daughter—you must protect my Annette. Once she’s safe, destroy them. Turn every last one of them to dust.”

The mayor’s words had begun to spin from dazed to crazed, but they sounded like derisive laughter to Barry Dawn as he said, “The town of Calico’s a full day’s ride on a fast horse. We’d better get going. You happen to have a picture of your daughter?”

“Come to my house,” replied the mayor, staggering to his feet.

“She’s a hell of a looker,” Barry Dawn said, holding the photo up over his head

and shutting one eye.

“You can say that again. If I’d known that, I’d have told you to pay me half wages and throw in this little peach!” Hiki chimed in.

The group was on the street in front of the mayor’s house. All of them were astride cyborg horses, and at first glance they just seemed to be hanging around chatting, yet an air of danger slowly emanated from them. The battle wouldn’t begin when they came into contact with the Nobles. It would begin sooner—right now, in fact. The chances of them cooperating seemed about as likely as an atheist believing in God. The instant they’d learned the deaths of their peers would increase their own compensation, they’d all become enemies—almost as much as the Nobility were.

High in the saddle and looking as gloomy as ever, Leica said, “We’re all in the same boat. From here on out, we’re rivals! Godspeed to you.”

And saying that, he gave a kick to his horse’s flanks and galloped off to the north.

“Oh no you don’t!”

“You won’t steal a march on me!”

With those cries, the Confessor and Barry Dawn gave chase.

Quake Resden was also about to gallop off, but he quickly pulled back on the reins to stop his horse, then craned his bull neck toward the last of the group—Hiki. He alone showed no signs of following after the pack.

“Aren’t you going?”

From the back of his steed, the slim seraphim of a man grinned faintly.

“Sure I am. Last to leave, and first to arrive. Off you go, and don’t you worry about me. We’ll meet again after I’ve taken care of those lousy Nobles.”

In response to those strangely confident remarks the giant raised one hand and rode off.

Once the figure that looked like he’d crush his horse at any moment had disappeared down the road, Hiki spread his arms from his spot in the saddle. The sleeves of his thin garment ran from his wrists to his ankles almost like wings,

and they became taut membranes.

“No wind, eh? Let’s make some, then.”

His slender foot kicked his horse’s flank. The cyborg horse galloped off down a road in completely the opposite direction from the man’s four colleagues.

“Last to leave, and the first to arrive,” Hiki murmured as if the words were a spell, then he lightly jumped up on top of his saddle and spread his arms.

The pair of membranes caught the wind, billowing out behind him like the wings of an angel. And then Hiki’s body drifted into the air, quickly rising higher and higher. Just like an angel. Perhaps that was why his name was written with the ancient characters for “flight” and “demon.” Catching the wind—or the airflow from his cyborg horse’s mad gallop—he had become a bird.

Perhaps the animal had been trained in this regard, because on losing its master the cyborg horse halted and raised its head, spotting the figure that’d already been reduced to a speck. Before long, the speck was flying north at a speed no bird could ever match, and the horse began to give chase with the wind swirling in its wake. No one save this faithful steed knew that its sky-bound master was now flying at a rate easily in excess of the speed of sound.

Three hours later, a comm bug from the town of Calico brought the sheriff shocking news. With the insect in hand the lawman ran to the mayor’s house and had it repeat what it’d told him.

“The village of Jagos is gone? Burned to the ground?” the mayor asked once more, and the locust-like comm bug responded in the affirmative. A product of the Nobility, not only could the insect understand human speech and engage in conversation, it could also fly to its destination at supersonic speeds.

“Five days ago, someone attacked the village of Jagos, turning its inhabitants into servants of the Nobility. For four days no travelers passed through there, but on the morning of the fifth day the town of Calico received this information via a comm bug from a traveler paying a call on the village.”

Word of this had shocked the town of Calico, and the reconnaissance party that was immediately dispatched had confirmed the accuracy of the traveler’s report. In Jagos, villagers had been sleeping in houses with all the windows shut,

their fangs exposed. However, there'd only been five of them—the rest were in the village meeting place. They'd been reduced to brutalized corpses, their limbs either ripped or chopped off. The reconnaissance party had been reminded of the end the Xeno clan had met.

According to the comm bug, the strange devastation had come as evening approached. Having completed their investigation, the reconnaissance party had left the village, but there was an aircraft they'd spotted even before making their exit. For roughly an hour it'd circled at an altitude of about a thousand feet as if waiting for the group to leave, and once the reconnaissance party was some fifteen hundred feet from the village, the craft dropped something. Purely by chance, one member of the reconnaissance party happened to see it transpire.

"And then, the village was enveloped in flames."

At that last remark from the comm bug, the mayor closed his eyes. The sheriff couldn't tell whether the old man was trying to picture the fiery inferno, or to expel it from his memory. The lawman immediately thought of something else. What he'd discussed with the five Hunters just before they'd left.

After slaking their thirst in the village of Jagos and playing out their bloody vengeance, where had the Noblemen vanished to? And then, on noticing a certain sound, he turned his gaze out the window to a world approaching nightfall.

Damn it all. Rain at this of all times?! If they run into those bastards soaked to the skin, they'll be off to their final reward! Of all the shitty luck.

In the blink of an eye, the light rains that'd started just around noontime had become a torrential downpour—the kind of "heavy" rain unique to the Frontier that would hammer those on the road. Hammer them? The terrible precipitation could strike a person with the same force as hail, leaving unprepared travelers unconscious on the road and openly inviting death. On meeting with the kind of downpour that occasionally killed even monsters, people would go into their homes, while travelers would either make use of a portable tent or retreat to one of the emergency shelters situated along the highways, where they'd pray that the savage rains wouldn't become a thunder-and-lightning storm. Out on the Frontier, lightning would split massive trees and shatter boulders just like the

spear of a great god of antiquity. Even greater fire dragons and armored beasts wouldn't escape instantaneous death if they were struck. As a result, the people of the Frontier had come to refer to the lightning that bleached those downpours as "the Glittering Gates to the Land of the Dead."

Out in those fearsome rains, a carriage raced recklessly on. It was a coach that'd been hired in town. Unfortunately for both the passenger and the driver, the day of their departure had been blessed with sunshine and blue skies. A crowning piece of misfortune was the fact that the aircraft carrying this passenger had arrived from the Capital more than an hour ahead of schedule. By the time the downpour hit them, the coach was in the middle of a high pass where both pressing on and turning back became impossible. While the driver recommended turning back, the passenger had insisted that they press on. If they continued on three miles beyond the pass, there'd be a shelter. The driver, who'd actually been on the fence about what to do, then decided to go for it.

Now the rain sprayed off the carriage so hard it left a white haze over it as it was coming up on the crest of the pass.

"We made it," the driver announced with an approximation of relief from beneath his vinyl slicker.

It was unclear whether the flash of white that bleached the world then was to celebrate that fact, or if it was just a mocking bit of irony. Only a heartbeat later came a crack of thunder like the howl of a colossal beast.

The pair of cyborg horses reared on their hind legs in an expression of the instincts they'd had since before their conversion. Fear.

"Gates to the Land of the Dead?" the driver murmured in a dazed tone as he desperately fought the panicked horses. "Got no choice but to shoot down from the pass in one go. Don't know if the footing will be safe or not, though."

As if his grumbling had been overheard, a voice from the brass communication tube set to the right of his seat said, "It's okay. Just keep going." It was the strong yet cultured voice of a young lady.

Like I needed you to tell me that, the driver thought to himself, but, recalling how she'd overruled him when he wasn't sure whether or not they could make it over the pass, he responded, "Well, I aim to."

He then raised his whip defeatedly.

III

Before he could strike a fresh blow with that coiling serpent of a whip, its length drooped down weakly. The driver had raised his right hand high but then forgot to follow through with the motion as he peered into the darkness ahead. He was certain the lightning that'd just flashed had picked out the form of a horse and rider.

One more time, the driver pleaded in his heart. *I'm begging you—just let me see that gorgeous face one more time.*

His wish was answered. Answered by a voice even more lovely than the face burned into the back of his eyelids.

"It would seem you're in a bit of a jam, are you not?" said a voice that actually issued from the vicinity of the rider's face. It had such a mysterious ring to it that it made the driver tremble again. However, its tone was no more than a whisper. So, how could it reach his ears through such a deafening downpour?

As if to respond in kind, the driver lowered his voice as well, saying, "No, not really. I was just thinking over whether to head down now or to sit the rain out here."

"And which did you decide upon?" the rider asked, apparently able to catch the driver's hushed tone as well.

Even as his body melted into warm putty with rapture, the driver got a chill.

"Well, I'm gonna head on down."

"That's the proper choice. Though sitting the rain out here would also be the proper choice."

"How's that?"

The voice rang out again, gloomy and gorgeous in the darkness.

"However, there's an even *better* choice!"

The driver was at a loss for words.

"The passenger in your coach is a young woman, is it not?"

There was still no answer from the driver.

“She would’ve arrived at Calico Airfield from the Capital just past noon today. Is that not correct?”

The driver got the feeling he’d been caught up in some awe-inspiring fate. A horrifying fate.

“I should like to confirm her name with you. What does she go by?”

Silence spread along the road through the pass, with the darkness and the rain.

Yet, rising above it all, a sharp-toned voice replied, “I’m Annette Krishken! Do you have some business with me?”

Before the driver could open his mouth, a trembling voice like a plucking of golden harp strings covered with blood said, “Yes—just as I thought.”

To the driver, the speaker sounded moved nearly to tears.

“I was so excited, I set out before my compatriots and arrived first. Out on the plains it would be impossible to miss you, but it was in this auspicious spot that long ago our clan discovered Grand Duke Jekyll’s army in a driving rain, striking the first blow and wiping them out. Come to think of it, the hour is nearly the same, and just look at the weather. It must be through divine providence that I can now make the daughter of our nemesis one of our kind in this very place. Woman—descendant of the Krishkens—step down from the coach.”

“Now wait just a minute,” the driver interrupted. The speaker’s words had returned him to his senses. Letting the whip in his right hand lie across his knees, he said, “Just who in the name of hell are you, buster? Since you’ve flat-out ignored me, I don’t give a good goddamn about anything you have to say.”

“And you shall stop me?” the voice from the darkness asked with amusement.

“It’s my job to see to it my passenger makes it safely to her destination. Sorry, but as a rule, this is how I deal with thieves, highwaymen, and kidnappers.”

He turned the butt end of the whip toward the source of the voice. A concealed trigger was revealed, and the driver’s finger curled around it and pulled. Though he held the weapon at waist level, long experience guaranteed

the accuracy of his aim.

With an impact like a blow from a small dragon, a ball of hot lead was swallowed up by the pitch blackness of the man's gut. While that wasn't as lethal as a shot through the heart, ninety-nine times out of a hundred it would take the fight out of an opponent.

For his next attack the driver discarded the whip, grabbing the repeating rifle that stood next to the driver's seat. This time he took careful aim. He braced the weapon against his shoulder.

Suddenly white flames glowed right before his eyes, not two inches from him. No, not flames, but a pale face. It only looked like flames on account of its beauty. Before he could even wonder if there could be a man with such exquisite features in this world, the driver was drowning in that beauty. He didn't even have time enough to question when the man had come right up in front of him.

The gun fell.

The other man's face smiled alluringly.

"My name is Baron Nichol Hayden, of the first house of Xeno. When you reach the hereafter, you may tell them this: *I had the good fortune of being sent to hell by a kiss from the esteemed baron.*"

And then the driver was as motionless as if he hung in midair while the alluring red lips of the other face pressed to his like a lover's. Two seconds passed . . . three . . . A bewitching time passed in the darkness where none would see. Even the thunder held its breath.

Finally, the pale face pulled away. The driver's face remained there.

Lightning zipped down. The face it illuminated was as shriveled and dry as that of a mummy. Like a dead branch, the body dropped jerkily from the driver's seat to the ground, its fall punctuated by a roar of thunder.

"The obstacle has been removed. Come, child!" She was addressed by a voice matching a face that'd returned to its rightful place atop the steed. "You saw the kiss I just gave, did you not? Did you find me comely? If so, there shall be no escape for you. Come out. Surrender to the desire burning so fervently in your heart, and accept my kiss."

His face was turned toward the coach door, watching.

It wasn't long before it opened from within. The girl who stepped out into the falling rain looked to be about sixteen or seventeen years of age. She wore a frilly white blouse and a blue skirt that went down to her ankles. Rain bounced off her round-brimmed hat decorated with flowers. And just as Baron Hayden had suggested, she swooned from his pale countenance, far lovelier than her flowers or even the girl herself. In a manner of speaking, she was mesmerized by his good looks, the mind of even this pure girl invaded by lewd thoughts.

Baron Hayden let a little smile escape, as if his work were a fait accompli.

"Come," he commanded.

A flash of light exposed him on his white steed for a single instant. A long robe the color of darkness covered him down to the knees, and if he were to stand on the ground, it would undoubtedly conceal his boots of the same color as well.

Annette walked up to him. Leaning over in the saddle, the baron cupped her face between his hands.

"Though it's a shame to drain the life from one so lovely, my hatred burns hotter than the flames of hell. Your death will no doubt plunge your father, your mother, and your entire family into a boiling morass of grief. Such sweet expectation."

He whispered those deadly words from so close their lips nearly touched.

The girl let out a gasp. But was it a groan of fear, or an exhilarated moan?

The baron turned his grinning face ever so slightly, preparing for that deadly kiss, and then—

The baron spun around as if he'd been shot. It was toward the same road through the pass that'd brought him here that he turned. Perhaps seeing something through that weighty darkness, perhaps hearing something, he cocked a willow-thin eyebrow. There was no more laughter swimming in confidence.

"They come. My compatriots are on their way. But before them comes a lone rider—oh, who could this be? Can you see him, child? My hands are trembling.

My feet are riveted. My heart hammers madly. Tell me, if you will, what this is I feel? Is this the thing known as fear?”

However, the baron’s eyes were wildly aglitter, and a pair of gleaming sharp fangs poked from the corners of his mouth. His body swelled with enmity and the lust for battle.

“I shan’t let anyone have you. Here and now, you shall receive my kiss.”

And as he spoke, his deadly lips drew closer. The baron had supreme confidence in his abilities, and in the fact that the girl would let him do this without showing a whit of resistance.

The heavens and earth were bleached white. The Nobleman’s handsome visage twisted in amazement. Annette backed away wildly. Her rain-slick face had returned to its senses—no, if anything, it was more feverish than ever with rapture.

The baron realized the girl was looking over his shoulder at something. Now he had no choice but to turn and look.

Again lightning flashed, revealing the sight to him—the stark image of a rider in black on a black steed about fifteen feet behind them. Beneath the wide-brimmed traveler’s hat, an exquisite visage was trained on him.

“Who in the hell are you?!” the Nobleman asked in a groan that reeked of defeat and despair.

More than surprise at how the rider could draw so close without his superior senses as a Noble detecting him, it was the humiliation the baron felt at those gorgeous features that seared his body. For the traveler’s face, illuminated by the lightning, was ten thousand times more exquisite than his own.

“Identify yourself. I should like to know your name. Your name, sir!”

Though the baron bellowed like a madman, there was no reply. Almost as if it were a reminder of one of the laws of the Frontier—there was no need to give your name to those who didn’t give theirs.

Suddenly, a different voice cried out. “This man is of the Xeno line. He said he’s Baron Nichol Hayden. And he came here to abduct me!” Annette shouted as her

whole body went as limp as a wet doll.

“If you’ll get out of the way, I’ll be going,” said a voice of steel struck by the rain. “I may make my living off the Nobility, but I’m not under contract to hunt this man.”

“No . . .”

As Annette stood there rooted in astonishment, her ears caught the clopping of the approaching cyborg horse’s hooves in the mud. It was going to pass right by both the baron and her.

Two voices rang out at once.

“You can’t . . .” Annette moaned dolefully.

“Hold,” Baron Hayden groaned in a voice mad with resentment.

The rider in black didn’t halt his steed, but rather rode on. He was almost to where the road began its descent.

“Hold,” the baron groaned once more, gnashing his teeth. “My name is Baron Nichol Hayden of the same Xeno clan the Sacred Ancestor honored with control of the southern Frontier wards. I shall not allow you to leave. No, this is unforgivable. No man should be more gorgeous than me.” After drawing a breath, he continued, “Such beauty. You will not always be counted among humans. Tell me your name.”

A flash of light lit the world like midday. Lit the rider.

Annette swooned. Even the rage-twisted Baron Hayden lost himself in rapture for a moment. Though neither of them could see anything but the figure’s back, that alone was enough to refresh the memory of his exquisite features.

The figure in black rode away as easily as if he were on a peaceful lane.

“I shan’t let you go!”

With that spiteful declaration of war, the baron urged his horse forward. His obsession reduced the lashing rain to steam as he closed on the rider ahead of him. He covered thirty feet in a heartbeat.

Lightning flashed. Annette saw a different gleam.

The baron and his steed had passed the rider in black on his right, stopping in front of him and turning to face him. Rain bounced off the strange weapon in the baron's right hand. Though its blade was more than a foot long, it was so thick it seemed it would easily slice even the body of an armored beast in half. If an ancient human had seen it, they might've found it resembled a Japanese pole arm called a *naginata*. The Noble had either kept it hidden beneath his robes or on one side of his saddle, but it didn't seem the sort of thing a mere mortal could wield with just one hand.

Not moving a muscle in the saddle, the baron said, "Identify yourself."

"D."

At that same moment, the top half of the baron's torso slid off at an angle and fell to the ground. Black blood fountained up, raining down on both the half still in the saddle and the one on the ground. Naturally, Annette hadn't known that the Nobleman had been cut in two from the left base of his neck to his right hip in the instant he and the Hunter passed each other.

The black horse and rider began to walk off. Only then did Annette notice the longsword the figure in black gripped in his right hand.

THE LONG, DARK NIGHT

chapter 2

1

With a soft rasp of steel, the rider in black returned his sword to the sheath on his back. To Annette's utter astonishment, he seemed ready to keep going without so much as a glance at her. His black cyborg horse was about to pass right by the coach.

"Wait!" she shouted, running toward him, but as soon as she did, she reeled. The rider was so handsome, he was like some lovely dream from which she couldn't awaken, and she was paralyzed both in heart and mind. Her fear of death had been lacquered over with fascination. Shaking her head to clear it, she shouted, "I'm Annette Krishken. My father is the mayor of the village of Krishken. See me home. You won't regret it."

Annette figured paying him twice the usual rate would probably suffice.

The horse and rider continued off in silence.

"Wait. No! Wait!"

Sending great splashes up from the ground, which had largely been reduced to mud, Annette dashed out in front of the horse and grabbed hold of its bridle.

"I'm in trouble here! Would you just leave a woman in a place like this?" she said, her angry tone jolting to the fore. She was being jerked forward with each step the horse took. "Stop! Please—just stop."

"You're headed in the wrong direction, *princess*."

The hoarse voice swiftly drained Annette of her strength. It was simply too much at odds with the face the lightning had shown her moments earlier.

"Do something! A few minutes ago, that villain said his friends would be right behind you, didn't he? They're after me! The Nobles of the Xeno clan were supposed to have been exterminated ages ago. And now they're back—I can't

believe this!”

“Xeno, eh? If they’re back, it’d be the five that were said to have fled to somewhere in the castle—Grand Duke Xeno’s son and four of his cousins. They’re real trouble, to be sure.”

Annette got the feeling that hoarse voice was neither addressed toward her nor engaged in soliloquy.

“There is something you could do,” the voice continued.

“What?!”

“You can hire *us*. Whatever money you’ve got on hand will do for a down payment, with the balance due once you’re safely home.”

“How much?” Annette asked, regaining some of her calm even as she was dragged along.

“Given the distance to the village of Krishken and the fact that it’s in the opposite direction, plus the strength of the opposition—that’ll be a hundred thousand dalas.”

“You must be joking!” Annette snapped, and in her anger she let go of the steed’s bridle that she’d latched onto. There in the rain and mud, she stood like a defiant deity. The road was just beginning its downward slope.

“For someone so good-looking,” she said, and, beginning to drift into infatuation she desperately fought to regain control enough to continue, “you have the heart of a loan shark, you know that? A hundred thousand dalas to bring me home—why, that’s enough to run a small village for half a year. Five thousand should more than suffice!”

“Oh, and where do you get that?”

Donning a perplexed expression, Annette gave the question some consideration. After advancing five or six paces down the slope along with the horse, she continued, “A long time ago, I was kidnapped by a band of outlaws, and the warrior who rescued me got five thousand dalas. What’s more, he had to deal with twenty of them. You’re only up against five—no, make that four now. You’re quite proficient at your trade, aren’t you? You *simply* have to take

care of the other four.”

“I did that one just now because he came at me.”

The hoarse voice had been replaced by one of steel. So lovely, but with a sternness radiating from its depths—Annette thought the blood was freezing in her veins. It wasn’t fear alone that froze it.

Was that supposed to mean he wouldn’t *simply* take care of the rest? Not knowing for sure, Annette was almost like a sleepwalker as she extended a pair of fingers and called to the leaving rider, “Twenty thousand dalas,” and even managing that much was something of a feat.

No reaction.

“Thirty thousand.”

Though she was sure there was no point in further negotiations with the rider, just to be on the safe side she said, “Fifty thousand.”

“Okay, princess—throw in the towel already.”

The hoarse voice had returned.

Damn it, she thought.

“Fifty-three thousand.”

The hoarse voice laughed. Mockingly it said, “Oh, look at that. His friends are coming. They’re making their way up the pass. They’ll be here in three minutes.”

“Fifty-five thousand.”

The hoarse voice fell silent. Through the now louder pounding of the rain, Annette thought she could hear the sound of iron-shod hooves climbing the pass.

“Extortionist—okay, I’ll pay you a hundred thousand. But I only have ten thousand on me, so you’ll receive the balance once I’m home!”

“Good enough,” the hoarse voice said, sounding relieved. “So, do you wanna ride this horse, or would you prefer the coach?”

“And meet the same fate as the driver? No, thank you! I’ll ride with you. Wait just a moment, and I’ll go fetch my luggage.”

“Just bring your purse.”

“Oh, I don’t believe you! Okay! Okay!”

Collecting the hem of her skirt in both hands, the girl returned to the coach and pulled a compact raincoat from the same bag that held her purse. Pulling it over her head, she came back with bag in hand.

Grumbling all the while about how he didn’t offer her a hand up and that they didn’t have time for this, she climbed on behind the rider and wrapped her arms around his waist. That made her feel safer—or it should have, but through her arms his body felt hard and cold as steel.

“God,” she murmured in spite of herself.

“What’s your problem now?” a hoarse voice inquired. “It ain’t bad enough you’re a tightwad?”

The horse had already turned around and begun traveling in the direction Annette desired. When they’d passed the stationary cyborg horse and the bisected corpse of Baron Hayden and had come alongside the coach, Annette heard the rasp of a sword being drawn from the back right in front of her.

Reaching out one hand, the rider grabbed the reins to the coach. He tied them to his saddle horn, and as soon as he let go of the reins they stretched like a rope, with one horse following along behind the pair. Logically, the girl knew that the rider must’ve used his blade to cut the traces between the coach and the horses drawing it in the blink of an eye. It’d literally been faster than the eye could follow.

After advancing another five or six paces, the horse stopped.

An indescribable air of weirdness enveloped Annette. It had billowed up the road from the slope. At the same time, she heard something. The sound of hoofbeats, like a spectral steed galloping out of the depths of the earth. And there was more than one horse coming.

The unearthly air of evil billowing toward them grew denser and more unsettling, seeping into the very flesh.

Despair sapped Annette’s will. She couldn’t get away. They had come back

from Hell to pursue her, and she was fated to fall victim to their fangs. They would drain the blood from her, making her a demon of the night who would seek the lifeblood of humans just as they did. Oh, why did she have to come back here? She could've stayed back in the Capital, enjoying her comfortable life as a student on the sizable allowance she received. What about her life? And look—now this guy couldn't even move a muscle.

The approaching hoofbeats halted. They'd completed the climb.

They were coming. They were going to attack. Her consciousness rapidly began to dwindle. She was so afraid, she was about to pass out.

And at that very moment—they started forward. Their horse and its riders.

The road to the top of the pass wasn't wide enough for two wagons to travel abreast, so every so often spaces had been set aside where someone going in the opposite direction could pull out of the way. The enemy blocked the center of the road, making it impossible for the young man and Annette to pass. Nevertheless, the rider in black and his steed pressed on.

The flashing lightning picked out dark silhouettes halted up ahead. Try as she might to see them, Annette couldn't even make out their outlines in the instant before they faded back into the darkness.

Illuminated by the lightning was "the Glittering Gates to the Land of the Dead." The two of them headed right for it. Was it that the rider didn't fear death? Or did he not even know what death was?

Arms still wrapped around that waist of steel, Annette shut her eyes. Her body trembled abruptly. It was a result of the supernatural aura that came from up ahead. But that air was suddenly shaken. As the unearthly air and her own trembling dwindled, Annette focused her gaze to the fore.

Look. Were the shadowy figures ranked like a threat against the very darkness not pulling off to the right? Like vassals bowing before their king. Like fiends cowed by a hero.

The rain still lashed the pair viciously, the wind still harangued their mount and the horse that followed them, yet the young man rode on into the night with the girl and the horses, not so much as drawing his blade.

Annette caught a sound she'd heard before. It was one her father often made the night before the village financial reports were presented as he studied the documents in his office. It was one condemned criminals in the Capital tried to choke back as they climbed the thirteen steps to their place of execution. The sound of grinding teeth.

Hating. Cursing. Regretting. As the pair passed right by them while they could only watch in silence, the Nobles hated themselves so much they could die. Cursed themselves. Regretted what they were. Oh, how many times over that would grow, becoming malice when they assailed the pair.

However, as they rode through the pass, Annette's heart was pounding with excitement. For she had seen the shadowy figures' faces etched by a flash of lightning. She knew the legends of the Xeno clan. The power and cruelty of its true heir and his cousins was also established to a shocking degree. She'd even come to accept that they had returned. But at present those demons were unable to lift so much as a finger to prevent the pair from making good their unhurried escape.

Almost impressed, Annette called out the young man's name.

"D."

Annette was surprised to discover she wasn't the one speaking.

"I must have heard your name a hundred and one times in the village of Jagos," someone said to him. "I asked a hundred and one people who the most powerful Vampire Hunter was. Oh, the look of bliss on the idiots' faces as they spoke of you. How they went on about your beauty, your physique, your sword, and the unearthly air about you—and not once in a hundred and one times did they fail to mention your name."

His tone suddenly shifted to gloom.

“We shall let you go for the time being. However, next time our swords will pierce you. Know that there shall never be a third meeting between us.”

A flash of light picked the speaker out starkly. Beneath a head of blazing red hair was a pair of blood-hued eyes brighter than flames that reflected the two riders.

“I am Xeno Gillian, son of Grand Duke Xeno Don.”

White light picked out a second face. It was a young man with an aquiline nose, wearing an ornate jacket reminiscent of formal attire.

“Xeno Gorshin. I’ll be seeing you.”

The third face glowed starkly. Unlike the first two, the long-haired youth almost seemed like a monk in his threadbare cape and horribly worn clothing. He had a giant scythe across his back.

“From generation to generation, the Grim Reaper has been called ‘Benelli’ by the Xeno clan. And that is my name.”

The fourth one squinted in the light. With a pair of crossed longswords strapped to his back, he had a youthful visage, but was still colored by the nihilism of the horribly aged.

“Xeno Braylow, and don’t forget it.”

Though he didn’t lift a finger, the sound of his voice alone was enough to raise a clang from his back. The pair of blades had slid up and down as if writhing about.

With the fifth gone, that left these four. When their eyes gave off the death light, and their hands took up swords, and their fangs were stained with blood, how many souls would be taken from their Creator?

Lightning flashed, and thunder followed.

On hearing a hoarse voice from the vicinity of the black rider’s left hip, Annette bugged her eyes.

“Well I’ll be—there are two people up in the sky mixing it up. Oh, one of them got whomped, I think. They’re going down. But—run for it! Something else is coming down, too!”

Before the hoarse voice could even finish speaking, the four vampires and the horse with two riders were racing off. D and Annette were headed for the bottom of the slope, while the four from the Xeno clan made for the top of the pass.

It was seven seconds after the silvery cylinder dropped that a million degrees of blistering heat vaporized the entire pass.

II

The world of darkness seemed to watch spellbound as the blast spread. That tiny flash of light, virulent napalm flames swallowing just over five thousand square feet, was a simple but effective way of dealing with the invaders. D and Annette watched from the summit of a mound on the plains as the light was assimilated by the darkness.

“It’s gone!” Annette said, lowering the collapsible night-vision goggles she held. “What was that just now? It blew the entire pass to smithereens.”

She looked terrified. Rain mercilessly pelted her thin vinyl raincoat.

“We had an enemy in the sky,” said the hoarse voice that issued from a little ahead of D and off to the left—and the hand that gripped the reins.

Strain her eyes as she might, Annette still didn’t see anything. There was only his left hand.

The voice continued, “I suppose it’s necessary that we answer our employer’s question. You see, there was an enemy in the sky above us. And another foe attacked them. One of those other four, I suppose. As a result of their battle, one of ’em was shot down. That explosion would’ve been a napalm bomb they were carrying.”

“Which one was taken out?”

“We’ll know soon enough.”

“If one of them is in league with those four, who in the world could the other

one be?”

“That I don’t know. To be flying in weather like this, it could be a smuggler or something, only that wasn’t any flying machine. There was no sound of engines from it, either. In which case it’d either be some stray demon bird, or else a bodyguard for you.”

“For me? Then my father might’ve hired them?”

“They were up there either watching over you or looking for you. Judging from the weather, probably the latter. You’d best pray the one that got shot down wasn’t guarding you.”

“Oh, I don’t care for this one bit. All this killing and dying.”

Annette furrowed her brow, shaking her head from side to side as if to deny the truth of any of this. Not that she was mourning the dead. Her tone and expression made it clear she found it revolting and bothersome to have others dying around her.

“Eighteen years I’ve lived in peace, so why did these musty old Nobles have to climb out of their graves now? And why are they after my family? This sort of trouble we could do without. Do you suppose it’s too much to hope that explosion wiped out the lot of them?”

“Since we’re safe and sound, it’s safe to assume the same goes for the enemy. I think they converged here to either snatch you or butcher you. They’re probably already headed this way.”

“Oh dear. After a short rest, you must take me home posthaste.”

“A short rest?”

“Well, we can’t go any farther in this downpour. My clothes are soaked, and the strain has left me exhausted. Let’s take a break somewhere.”

“We press on.”

The shriveled voice had suddenly been replaced by one of iron. Low and soft, his tone still made it clear he would brook no objections, yet Annette listened to it like a dotard while glaring at the man’s black back.

“And I’m telling you that *your employer* is tired and we need to rest. Try to

remember your place in this equation."

"Change horses," said the owner of that broad back.

At the bottom of the pass D had intended to put her onto the extra horse he'd taken from the coach, but the incident with the napalm had forced them to gallop away at top speed, so that Annette was still riding double on D's cyborg horse.

Annette didn't budge. While riding double was still a hassle, she didn't even want to move.

"I don't want to. Too much bother."

When she said that, the cyborg horse had already started forward through the needling rain.

"Stop for a minute. Every bone in my body is creaking. And my behind is killing me."

"Has to be better than dying."

The steely voice silenced the mayor's daughter.

"The enemy is already closing in. And there are four of them. We'll ride through the night."

Annette shuddered. Earlier, the demons pursuing her had allowed D to pass without lifting a finger to stop him. And that was only right, she thought, having witnessed the greatness that lay within the gorgeous young man, the skilled swordsmanship that'd dispatched Baron Hayden with a single blow. She wanted to laugh in their faces and tell them they could go to Hell. However, the malevolence that crazed their eyes as they looked at D and the ghastly aura that emanated from every inch of them had also been enough to make Annette's blood run cold. *These are Nobles*, she knew in her heart of hearts as she clung to D. Though her faith in D was absolute, these assassins weren't to be taken lightly. And *four* of them were coming.

"You're right—ride on, then."

"Oh, ain't you the smart cookie," the hoarse voice said, the tone carrying a laughter that infuriated Annette. She promised herself she'd find out the source

of it and make it pay.

As they were coming down the hill, something occurred to her and she had to ask, “They said there were five including the cousins, right? But you cut down one, leaving the other four who were back there. So, how did they manage to shoot down a foe in the sky overhead?”

There was no answer.

She figured it probably didn’t matter anyway. No matter how many of them there were, he would cut them down—because this gorgeous young man was clearly that ironbound rule made flesh.

They reached the bottom of the hill. Giving a light kick to his horse’s belly, D spurred it into a dash.

Racing through the night, ignoring even the dawn, it was nearly noon when they finally reached the town of Ligatem. A mining town with a population of about a thousand, the high-quality uranium ore excavated there kept the place prosperous.

“At any rate, we’ve gotta get a room at a hotel, let the girly get some sleep, and procure a horse, eh?” the hoarse voice said.

“I’ll thank to you make that ‘young lady,’” Annette said with displeasure, but she seemed to have no other complaints.

As D advanced on his cyborg horse, the bustle along the street died. On noticing his good looks, pedestrians were left breathless. Though one might’ve expected Annette to be disgusted by this, since entering town she’d powdered her face and applied lipstick, sitting up straight and proud to show her good looks off to even better effect. She believed herself to be the cause of the pedestrians’ silence.

“The girl behind you—seems she’s been fussed over up till now. Still, she is pretty good-looking,” the hand gripping the reins remarked with amusement.

D replied, “If we could, I’d like to pass right through, but we can’t do that.”

Unheard by anyone else, this was a conversation between D and his left hand alone.

“Probably not. She’s putting on a brave face, but the girl’s all tuckered out. You could knock ’er over with a feather. Gotta be tough being a beauty, though. Needs to work on everything besides her looks—what in the blazes?!”

Not three feet in front of the steed a mass of brown had slammed into the road, then swiftly resolved into a human form. It was a boy who appeared to be about ten years old. Though grimacing and clutching his back, he looked impudently up at the second-story saloon window he’d fallen from.

“Hold it right there, you little shit!” a man’s voice snarled viciously.

“The hell I will! That’s what you get for what you did to that girl. And next time, you won’t get off so easily!” the boy fired back, his words flying like bullets from a repeating rifle, and then in the blink of an eye he disappeared into the crowd. In the course of doing so, apparently he bumped into someone, as there was a thud and a cry of “Jerk! What are you doing, staring at a woman like that?!” Further curses rang out, then faded.

Annette snuck a peek in that direction, but D didn’t even glance at the boy.

When they arrived at the hotel another fifty yards away, there were angry shouts and a number of footfalls behind them, but D was so expressionless all that seemed like events on another world as he climbed off his cyborg horse, tethered both steeds to the hitching post, and brought Annette into the hotel.

Parting company with Annette in front of her room, D went back outside. He headed straight for the “bird man.”

After twisting and turning down numerous alleyways, D was greeted by a small shop with a rather spacious front yard. The sign read: *Pigeons, Bugs, Butterflies and More for Messaging*.

What D asked for was a “recon hawk.”

“Also, the camera has to be able to transmit,” the Hunter said, “and I need you to put some basic armor on it.”

“In that case, it’ll also need secondary propulsion,” the proprietor replied somewhat dreamily after gazing in rapture at D’s face for more than ten seconds. “All my big models are rented out right now. All that’s left is one bitty one. Got a camera on board, but it’ll barely make a sixty-mile round trip.”

“Good enough.”

“Okay, that’ll be an extra five thousand dalas.”

No sooner had the man finished saying that than the very end of his bulbous nose vanished. He only clutched his nose after bright blood had welled to the surface of a slice no bigger than the tip of his pinky. The scream came even later.

“This isn’t the first time we’ve had to have attachments put on a recon bird, you know. Thought you’d play us for a sucker, but you thought wrong. Three hundred and fifty dalas should do it, eh?”

Negotiations be damned, more than shock and fear from having the tip of his nose taken off, it was out of terror at not understanding what’d happened that the shopkeeper nodded. He didn’t have enough faculties left to even notice a dubious change in the customer in black’s tone of voice. He was bowing intensely and repeatedly, like a clockwork automaton, when the door opened and a brown-haired boy stuck his head in.

“Hey, isn’t that the squirt who—” the left hand murmured.

The boy shot a quick glance in that direction, but couldn’t discern anything.

“I’d heard someone had gone into this rip-off master’s shop, mister,” the boy said, and then his mouth fell open. Still, it was admirable the way he suddenly slapped his own cheeks, swiftly returning sanity to both his eyes and expression. “Man, you sure are one handsome cuss.”

His manly voice carried a feeling of pure admiration. His words were followed by a foul stench. From the look of his tattered shirt and trousers and the way his hair was plastered to his head, he and the bathtub hadn’t been on speaking terms for quite some time now.

“Boy,” he continued, “wish I’d been born with a face like that, too. Thanks to my mom, I’ve got kinda a pug nose. Well, not much I can do about that. Oh, I’m Pikk. By the way, I wouldn’t do business here if I were you.”

“D.”

But before the Hunter could ask the boy why he said that, the shop owner shouted with bulging eyes, “What’d you just say, you little thieving bastard?!”

He'd pulled out a towel to cover his nose, but as it was also soaked with blood, it remained a shocking sight. Shifting his eyes from the smirking boy—Pikk—to D, he said, "That little prick's a well-known troublemaker. Just a snot-nosed brat, but he sasses adults, steals liquor from the bar, helps hookers run off, blackmails and shakes down travelers—if we were to catch him, the mayor'd pay a reward. Don't you go believing anything that one tells you!"

"What are you talking about, jerk?" Pikk sneered. "The liquor in the bar was leftovers, so I helped myself. The girl from the cathouse's time was up, but she was being forced to keep working under a bogus contract. And all I ever blackmailed or shook down were stupid rich folks, no matter how much money they had. This here's the Frontier. Act like that, and you'll fall prey to bandits the second you step outta town. I taught 'em a lesson about survival. All I was doing was getting paid in return for the service."

"Why, you little—"

The shopkeeper reached for the rifle he had hanging on the wall. The gun brushed his fingers, then vanished.

"What in the—"

Setting down the rifle, D said, "So, you said he was a cheat, didn't you?"

Pikk gave a quiet, mature nod, saying, "Now, I don't know what sort of bird you asked for, but this old coot probably told you right now he ain't got nothing but little ones. So if it's gonna carry a payload, it'll need some upgrades. And that'll cost you extra."

The shop owner went white. His nose even stopped bleeding.

"Why, you little—"

"Right? I wouldn't use this place," Pikk said, grinning at D. "If it's a recon bird you need, I've got a good one. And you can have it for half of what this place usually charges. Naturally, that includes the upgrades."

"Don't you believe that little bastard. Ask anyone. They'll attest to me running an honest business."

"Of course they will. Round these parts, you're all in on it together. This whole

town’s rotten to the core. The merchants are all in cahoots, and they’ve got ties with the sheriff and the town hall. They rip off travelers and the only honest people in town—but they can’t pull a fast one on me. No, I turn the tables on ’em. That’s why they try and run me out.”

Not even turning to face the shop owner, D said, “The deal is off.”

“But that kid’s—”

“—better than the likes of you, it seems.”

The shop owner turned a stunned gaze to the vicinity of D’s left hip. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a grubby face ducking back out, and the figure in black headed for the door.

III

“Make it quick,” D said tersely on exiting the shop.

Brimming with confidence, the boy nodded vehemently.

“I hear ya. Just leave it to me.”

His right hand slipped into his ragged shirt, and out came a great hawk with wings folded. It was of such a size there didn’t seem to be any way the boy could’ve kept it concealed. Its wingspan alone was easily wider than Pikk was tall.

“You a cyborg?” said the hoarse voice. “Your stomach kept its functionality, but got a dimensional pocket that lets it double as storage—that’s a pretty tricky operation!”

“I had a really good doctor,” Pikk laughed. His white teeth gleamed like precious stones in his sunburnt face. “Pay enough and there’s nothing he wouldn’t do. Mine’s for stashing hot merchandise, but he did all kinds of operations on some folks. He was so busy, he just keeled over a couple months back. Couldn’t even spare enough time to work on himself. Well, Mister D, it’s just verbal, but we’ve got ourselves a contract, don’t we?”

“I want to ask you something.”

Putting away the hawk he’d been holding out, Pikk replied, “What’s that?”

“Why only half price? I doubt you’re that service oriented.”

“The truth is—” The mature expression once more became that of a ten-year-old. A look of naivety unimaginable after his earlier words and deeds came to rest on the boy’s face. “I’ll tell ya later.”

“Then no deal.”

“No way—I said half price! Tell you what, I’ll settle for a third. How about it?”

“Why the fire sale?”

The boy was cornered by the steely voice. “Ease up,” he said. “You’re embarrassing me.”

The boy laughed, but he realized he wouldn’t be able to fool this one. He was out of his league. Averting his gaze from D, he rubbed one hand along the side of his nose. After two shakes of his head, he finally continued, “Earlier, you had a girl riding behind you, right? I was wondering—would you introduce me to her?”

D was expressionless.

His left hand groaned, “Whaaaaat?!” and sputtered out a laugh. “I’ve heard of pearls before swine and blood from a stone, but this is a shocker. Beauty and the brat? Oh, that’s rich. Hey, D, let’s make his wish come true. Heh heh he—eerrrrrgh!”

Left hand still clenched tightly, the Hunter said, “I’ll pay the going rate for the hawk. Forget the other part.”

“No way,” Pikk shot back, scrutinizing D. No, actually *glaring* at him. But the challenge instantly melted from his eyes, easily settling the match. Still, the fight hadn’t left the boy entirely. “I don’t care how handsome you are,” he said, “don’t be so full of yourself. Th-th-there’s more to a man than just his face!”

D silently gazed at the youthful face, which was now the very picture of truculence.

Pikk froze. They were in different leagues—too different.

“Okay,” D said.

His left fist weakly exclaimed, “What?!”

The boy was speechless. Lowering his hands and spreading them wide, the boy

let his jaw drop as he stared at D.

“What’s wrong?” D asked, but as the boy remained as his was, the Hunter clapped him lightly on the shoulder.

Suddenly Pikk had a blank look on his face, and his eyes were swimming in his head. Apparently he’d been so surprised, he’d nearly fainted.

“It seemed that caught you off-guard. Did you think I’d refuse?”

“Huh? Yeah. I mean—shut up! One look at me, and she’ll learn the appeal of a real man. You’re gonna regret introducing her to me till your dying day!”

“I hope you’re right.”

It was rare for D to play along with anyone for so long—in fact, it was nearly miraculous. The fact that his left hand held its tongue was proof of that.

Maybe he was just working up his fight, but Pikk bared his teeth and growled, then gnashed them repeatedly.

“Okay, let’s go, then,” the boy said, turning in the direction of the hotel.

Catching him by the collar and hauling him back, D said, “First, launch that hawk for me. Got a camera and armor?”

“Right here. Just leave it to me.”

From the vicinity of his solar plexus Pikk then produced a miniature video camera and basic armor for the bird. The camera was equipped with mounting hardware.

“You’re well prepared, aren’t you?”

“Well, I get a lot of call for this. So, what area did you wanna shoot?”

“The ground between Salval Pass and the town. If it spots a foursome, have it follow them for a while and then come back.”

“Sounds interesting,” Pikk said, his eyes alight with curiosity. “Are you two being chased? If you are, hire me! I may not look it, but I pride myself on being pretty good with weapons. Hell, I’m a million times better than the third-rate Hunters in these parts!”

“Get it in the air.”

“Oh, right. First, the business at hand.”

In less than ten seconds Pikk had the armor on the hawk and the camera mounted. On seeing how deft the boy was, the left hand murmured, “Kid knows his stuff.”

After watching the bird wing its way skyward shortly thereafter, D then paid the boy.

“Well, just about time for the big event!” the boy said, jubilantly rubbing his hands together.

“Sure you’re dressed for it?” D inquired.

“Eh? You mean something’s wrong with what I got on?”

“Of course so,” said the hoarse voice. “It’s bad enough you’re in rags, but you stink to high heaven too.”

“Now that you mention it, I haven’t had me a shower in a while. But that’s all right. There’s more to a man than the way he sme—” the boy was saying, ready to march on triumphantly when he was once again snagged and dragged back.

“Isn’t there an establishment around here that could take care of that?” asked D.

“There’s a spa for women. They’re okay with guy customers, too—but I’ll have none of that. I want the little lady to see me just as I am.”

Somewhere, someone guffawed.

“Have it your way,” D said. “But I’ll have to stay there when you see her.”

“Huh?!”

“After all, she’s had a sheltered upbringing,” said the hoarse voice. “Can’t have a punk like you from gods-know-where getting too close to her, now, can we?”

“To hell with that, asshole. That tears it. I positively ain’t taking no stinking bath. I’ll see her as I am. It’s like this—it’ll be a test to see if the little lady is any judge of men.”

The boy wanted to glower at the source of another guffaw, but all he saw was the Hunter’s left hand.

“You might have a weird little trick there, but you won’t be making a fool of me for long, D. Just you wait and see if I don’t have the little lady patting me on the head.”

And as the boy stormed away indignantly, behind him there was an explosion of laughter as well as D’s voice.

“Annette is resting now. Stop by the hotel in about three hours.”

Annette was in a horrible mood. Though she needed at least seven hours of sleep a day to keep from being a total wreck, D had woken her in the middle of it. She knew that not even four hours had passed, and to top everything off she’d been told some boy she didn’t know wanted to meet her. Listening to the story, she learned that it was in exchange for letting them have the recon bird for a third of the going rate.

“What’s that got to do with me?!” Annette fumed.

She had a point.

D responded by saying, “If you don’t want to, that’s fine.”

That wasn’t a threat. He meant it literally.

When that cold gaze fell on her, even before she could be mesmerized, a chill seeped from the marrow of her bones, spreading through her body like exhaustion and causing Annette to shake her head from side to side.

“All right,” she said. “But I’ll only talk with him for five minutes in the lounge downstairs—okay?”

D then left, and ten minutes later a grubby boy with three roses in hand appeared at Annette’s table in the lounge.

Shortly after she’d returned to her room D called on her. This was exactly what Annette had been waiting for, and she was ready to launch into a tirade, but the second their eyes met her throat tightened and her brain began to seethe, yet at the same time she felt like her heart was in the grip of an icy hand.

“He left happy,” the Hunter told her.

Even then, all she could say in reply was, “Oh, really?”

The Hunter added, “Get your stuff together. We’re heading out.”

He said it so matter-of-factly. Wasn’t this young man the same person who’d sent her into that ordeal?

Suddenly, she snapped. “You’re supposed to be watching out for me, aren’t you? Yet you barely let me get any sleep at all, and you set me up on a date with a filthy urchin. Oh, that was the worst time!”

“Still, it was pretty long,” said D. “Thirty minutes. So he went away happy. Looks like you’ll remember it as long as you live.”

Annette looked to the heavens. That kid—the person in charge of the lounge and others working there had popped their eyes and held their nose around the grimy boy—what was there about him to remember as long as she lived?!

“That’s a joke to make my blood run cold, D. On the bright side, it’s over and done. I never want to see that kid again. And if he comes looking for a second date—”

“There won’t be a second time. The enemy’s less than three miles from town. Get your stuff ready.”

A terrible tension and shaking came over Annette.

Beyond the window, the world was gently shaded blue.

“The hawk came back, then?”

D nodded. Then he told her, “And it died.”

Annette thought even his tone seemed tinged with blue.

TRAVELING COMPANIONS

chapter 3

1

Though Annette rubbed her still-sleepy eyes and made a great show of saying how tired she was, the dashing young man in black would hear none of it.

“You’ve got ten minutes to get ready. I’ll be waiting outside,” was all he told her before making a prompt exit.

“How about treating me like a human being, you lousy employee?!” she snarled, hurling her pillow at the door D had left through a good minute after he’d gone.

At any rate, she’d gathered her things and indignantly left the hotel when she was greeted by a chilling sight. D was over by the post the horses were hitched to—and she’d be damned if it wasn’t that malodorous kid he was talking to!

On spying the stunned Annette, Pikk flushed crimson. He then stood bolt upright, and, scariest of all, showed her a white grin.

It seemed as if enraged blood had risen to infuse each and every hair on her head. Hustling over, Annette said, “What are you two whispering about? D, you don’t seriously intend to let this kid—”

D looked at her face, rather cute but trembling with rage, and said coolly, “Seems he’d like to go with us.”

The blood her anger had heated cooled. Or rather, it froze.

“That’s right!” the boy exclaimed, dealing the coup de grace with a jubilant face. “This town’s plumb run dry of hospitality. Hire me. It’s gonna be a long haul, right? I’ll find drinking water, hunt wild boar, or do anything! My rate’s a dala a day. A good man at an affordable price.”

“That’s the gist of it,” D said.

Annette scrutinized the faces of the two of them. Apparently they were

serious. Could they be plotting to annoy her so much she'd turn neurotic, then force her family to pay a king's ransom in medical costs? Annette had such a strong aversion to the boy—Pikk—that this sort of wild idea could gain purchase in her head. For starters, he still stank!

"Not on your life!" Her brain was still seething with anger and loathing, and it was probably on account of that she spoke. "No way on earth are we taking that filthy brat along. And if you're hell-bent on having him go, D, I'll dismiss you right here!"

"Seems like an overreaction," a hoarse voice murmured with amusement somewhere.

"And that's the way it is," D told Pikk.

For a minute the boy sniffled a bit, but then he stood up straight, tucked one hand in his armpit, and started whispering about something.

"Could be," said D.

At that point, the boy started whispering again.

"Hmm, good point," the hoarse voice then conceded.

This called to Annette's mind visions of a great-great-grandfather nodding his head sagely, and she stomped her feet, saying, "Stop your secret plotting!"

She shouted that so loudly, stunned pedestrians stopped in their tracks.

"Just as I thought," Pikk said, nodding gravely.

"Uh-huh," the hoarse voice added.

The boy's dark face grinned at Annette and D, and he said, "I see. Okay, I give up. Still—"

When he'd said that much, from down the street there were shouts of "There he is!" and shrill cries as a bunch of rough-looking guys dashed in that direction, bulling their way through the pedestrians and forcing wagons to come to a sudden stop. Each face was angry and wore the look of a huntsman who'd finally cornered his prey—or worse, they were deeply stained with the air of a carnivore.

For a moment Pikk looked perfectly ready to run, but one glance at Annette and he quickly stopped.

“The kid puts on a brave front,” the hoarse voice said with admiration. “Just so he can look good in front of a girl. He’s a man, all right.”

Saying nothing, D gazed at the boy.

Glancing once more at Annette, Pikk then quickly strode out into the middle of the street.

“Taking care that we don’t get mixed up in this? Considerate little cuss.”

There were six men. Rough faces, bull necks, arms and legs as thick as logs—and though they looked dimwitted, their bodies and faces seemed the result of a steady diet of hard physical labor and abuse.

“The bouncers from Animal House, eh? Well, I’ll be damned. Not much of a match for the great Pikk, but I’ll give you a go!”

Raising both arms easily, the boy made short, quick movements with his feet. Footwork. He had a remarkable boxing stance. As for how good he actually was—not one of the angry men showed any signs of stepping forward.

In terms of size, they were literally adults against a child. The fight would probably come to an anticlimax as soon as they grabbed him by the arm.

“Well, why don’t you come at me?” Pikk jeered, looking up at his foes. “Big lunks like you. Well, you won’t take me on one-on-one, will you? That’s ’cause you know full well what happened to your friends. But that girl used to give me candy, and after her time was up you kept her there under a phony contract. When she tried to run out, you ganged up on her and burned half her face off. After she went and killed herself, I avenged her. *He* was the one who pressed the hot iron against the girl’s face. So I put the hurting on the old man and his cronies. You wanna follow in his footsteps? You’re wastes of skin for even taking money from a shithole like that. Guess it’s only fair you get the same treatment!”

Not surprisingly, after the preteen had rattled on that far, every speck of hesitation was blown to the wind, and one of the men looked over at D. Shrieking, Annette hid behind his black back.

“And *you*, stay the hell outta . . .” he began menacingly, but the thuggish demeanor fell to pieces and the man was forced to avert his gaze.

“So it’s one against six, maybe one against five and a half. A thousand dalas on the kid,” said the hoarse voice.

Some people in this world had nothing better to do than sit on the bench by the hotel entrance watching people come and go, and one such idle individual replied, “I’ll wager a thousand on the six.”

From the crowd that’d formed at some point there came further cries from men and women of “Me, too,” and “I’ll take some of that action.”

“Okay, now, money. Let’s see your money,”

As soon as the left hand reached out and extended its palm, those who’d spoken out thronged around—and when the crowd parted, the black-gloved hand gripped a thick wad of bills.

“Act your age,” D said in a low, reproving tone, but he was wasting his breath.

“What, it’s just a little diversion, all in good fun. Me and three of the townsfolk are the only ones betting on the kid. The other fifteen all have their money on the six. Travelers who don’t know the situation, I guess. Heh heh, this’ll be easy money!”

Not even waiting for D’s next remark, the hoarse voice called out, “Okay, go get ’em!”

Three of the men suddenly charged at the kid, one from either side of him and one from the rear, making for a rather odd fight. The boy would be crushed by the giants before he could do anything. That’s what everyone was thinking, but at that instant an impossible scene came to pass. Who should be crawling on the ground clutching their solar plexus, or knee, or crotch, but the giants?! Slumping forward out of necessity, the men’s bodies were exquisitely arranged so that each supported the others. The boy who appeared from beneath them to take a bizarre stance was greeted with cries of surprise from the crowd—and applause.

“The squirt knows some martial arts, eh?” the hoarse voice murmured. The tone carried something more than admiration. “And strange ones at that . . .”

The voice was drowned out by the buzz of the crowd. Three foes remained—and all of them were armed. One had a longsword, one a spiked club, and one an iron whip. Normally in a situation like this those a safe distance away would deride this as underhanded, but to the contrary, the crowd grew quiet because they all knew these men were truly out for blood, and the spectators were in awe of the skill of the boy that'd driven his opponents to this extreme.

"Now things are getting interesting," said the hoarse voice. "These three are old hands at the rough stuff—so, who would you bet on?"

Miraculously, there was actually an answer. "The boy."

What happened next took so little time it was a snapshot of action faster than the average person could follow, though D saw it all quite clearly. First the spiked club swung at Pikk. The club itself was oak. But it bent like rubber. That little trick was to mess with the defenses of an opponent who was expecting a normal club.

However, the boy deftly and quickly ducked below the curious blow. He didn't flee, but rather slammed into his opponent's chest. His palm made a light strike to his foe's solar plexus, and the man's sculpted abdominal muscles gave way like they were made of cake. As he collapsed, his body was still angled forward as when he'd swung his club, and the boy grabbed his foe's crotch with his other hand, turned to the right with unbelievable speed, and hurled the man at the one holding the iron whip.

Naturally the boy intended for them to collide, but the man with the iron whip didn't hesitate to bring his weapon down on his compatriot. A *snap!* of struck flesh reverberated like a gunshot, and the man with the club was slammed against the ground.

Apparently the boy had had a different aim. Still poised as he'd been when he'd thrown the man, he bounded off to his left—right next to the guy with the longsword. Surprised by an attack contrary to his expectations, the man with the longsword still managed to make a horizontal swipe with his blade as he moved to the right. The boy had more than sufficient time to duck his head just low enough to escape the slash. However, the sword blade ignored the law of inertia, stopping dead in midair, then dropping toward the boy's head with less than a hundredth of a second's pause. The longsword's deadly blade, however, slashed only air.

A thousandth of a second sufficed for the boy's movements. Faster than the sword could make another slash, the boy's foot shot up past the man's chest like a splash from a raging river, sending him toppling back with a shattered jaw. Though his body reeled, the man didn't drop on the spot. A black snake wound around him, as if he were only in the way, and flung him back a good thirty feet. It should be noted that such a distance was well in excess of the iron whip's length, and this was a feat of ungodly skill.

"Oh, so that's how you use that iron whip, is it? It's a special alloy. He went and left the worst for last."

"I reckon so," the young man standing beside D said in agreement. He was mistaken. Shaking his tightly clenched fist, he said, "That whip fella goes by the name of Henshaw, and he's started trouble before with me and my friends. Just watch him. Right there. There's just no way of telling which way his whip's gonna come at you."

A stout forearm was thrust out in front of D, and the flesh on the underside of it had been split like a pomegranate from the wrist to the elbow.

II

The man—Henshaw—had seen through the boy's techniques. There was no room for horsing around. He meant to finish this.

With a flick of his wrist, the two-foot-long whip stretched out to ten feet. Usually it whistled through the wind to strike his opponents before they could blink, whether coming down from on high, skimming across the ground at their feet, or arcing in from either side as he saw fit. It was impossible for his opponents to follow the tip of his whip.

Henshaw chose a killing blow. He raised his whip to strike. That venomous serpent of steel was hidden from the boy's field of view. The whip flew through the air with a searing howl, aiming obliquely for the base of the boy's neck, but he dashed in the same direction to dodge it. Instead of striking the ground, the whip reared in midair like a serpent, taking aim once more at the boy's neck.

The boy stopped in his tracks.

Looks like he's given up, Henshaw thought.

His whip definitely wrapped around the boy's neck. However, a tremendous force pitched Henshaw forward. As he jammed on the brakes, his eyes caught sight of the boy standing right in front of him with the whip gripped in his right hand.

When the hell did he manage that?!

The instant that thought flashed through his mind his field of view was filled by the palm of a hand, Henshaw felt the shock of his nose being broken all the way to his brain, and he passed out on the spot.

The victor of the six-on-one fight was greeted by cheers and unadulterated applause.

"Okay—pay up now! Oh, thank you kindly. Hey, where do you think you're going? You're not getting away! Go on, pay up. Gambling's a sport for gentlemen. Wait, damn you! Come back here!"

Men who buttoned their lips and tried to dissolve into the crowd were caught by the scruff of the neck by D's left hand, and when they turned to snarl an insult, one look at D's face instantly turned them to putty, so that they dropped coins or wads of bills five or ten times their actual wager into his black-gloved

hand.

“Heh heh, money, money, money!” the left hand cackled, clutching a wad of bills when a little hand was casually extended.

“What?”

“What nothing. Those are my winnings, ain’t they? Fork ’em over,” the boy Pikk said intimidatingly. His chest was rising and falling like mad and he barely had enough breath to speak, probably due to the feat of super-speedy movement he’d just executed.

“What are you talking about? This is what we—I mean, what *I* made gambling. Not so much as a thin—”

The left hand stretched forward.

“Take it,” said a steely voice.

“Wh-what are you saying? That’s my—”

“That’s what the kid earned through his hard labor.”

D’s eye was trained on Pikk’s other hand. The boy must’ve torn off one of his sleeves, because a piece of cloth the same color as his shirt was wrapped around the hand, though blood was soaking through it. A result of grabbing the whip.

“So, this is where that voice like death warmed over comes from?”

Having finally taken notice, Pikk glared at the left hand.

“I don’t know why, but it looks like you’ve got yourself a cranky parasite. Is it really okay for me to take this money?”

“It’s yours.”

“I guess it is. In that case, I won’t be shy about accepting it!”

The boy was in the process of stuffing the money into the pocket of his cotton trousers when a burly voice said to him, “I’ll take that.”

“Sheriff?!”

Resembling a bloated wineskin, the corpulent giant of a man had a gleaming gold star on his chest and a double-barreled shotgun tucked under one arm as

he waddled over. Apparently the trip over from his office, wherever that was, had been a taxing endeavor, and without even bothering to mop the cascade of sweat from his face, he grabbed the wad of cash from Pikk's pocket and tucked it into one on the chest of his shirt.

"Aw, you can't do that, Sheriff. I earned that fair and square."

"I realize that. And these here are damages, fair and square," he said.

Running his eyes over the sheaf of papers he was handed, the boy let his gaze linger on a few of them.

"What are all these? The butcher, baker, grocer, saloon, cobbler, and a mess of others—these are all bills?!"

"You betcha. It's a tally of everything you've swiped up till now. And you're getting a bargain at that. Now, get out of town real quick-like."

"Why?"

First the lawman nodded, then he pointed to the six unconscious men and ordered a few of the reluctant-looking townsfolk who were still standing around, "Get 'em to the hospital." On top of that, he barked at the rest to move along before lowering his voice and continuing, "The owner of Animal House has connections to all the right people in these parts. In two, maybe three days' time, some fine-tuned killers and warriors will be here looking for your head. A little while ago I saw twenty or thirty messenger hawks taking wing from the roof of Animal House. Probably at the bidding of the owner's wife."

"I ain't running! I'll stand and face 'em like a man," the boy said, his chest puffed with anything but false bravado.

Pulling a dour face, the sheriff said, "That's all well and good for you, but I can't have anybody else getting caught up in this. If anybody dies on account of you, either directly or indirectly, you'll be getting a hell of a lot more than a week in the hot box!"

Pikk saw the muzzle of the double-barreled shotgun rise to his chest.

"Okay. I'll leave. That's all I've gotta do, right?"

"That's about the size of it. Happy trails to you." At that point the sheriff

turned to Annette and said, “Miss, if it’s not too much of an inconvenience, would you be so good as to bring this young fella somewhere he won’t cause a ruckus?”

No doubt this proposition came because the lawman could see she was set to make a journey.

Annette’s reaction was perfectly natural. Raising the corners of her eyes sharply, she said, “Surely you jest. You’re talking about taking a filthy man-eating rat of a child on the road with me? He’ll make off with all my food and money. I absolutely refuse!”

She had unloaded so forcefully that pedestrians halted and looked in her direction. Annette held her tongue. Her cheeks flushed with shame.

“That’s a pity. We’d prepare a cyborg horse for the boy as well as rations. He won’t be a nuisance—”

Having said that much, the sheriff looked at Pikk.

A smile covering all of his small face, the boy nodded.

“—I think,” the lawman added, but it was plain he had no confidence in that remark.

Annette said nothing, but shook her head in firm refusal.

At that point, a hoarse voice suggested, “Sheriff, how about a letter of commendation?”

“Letter of commendation?”

Annette’s expression softened, and the sheriff’s face beamed.

Taking care not to look at him, he said to D, “For one so young, that’s a mighty grim voice you’ve got there.” That said, the sheriff continued, “That’s right. If you were to honor our request, naturally you’d be awarded a letter of commendation. As you know, ten letters of commendation from the sheriff’s office will earn you a special letter of commendation from the governor of that Frontier sector. Collect five of those, and you get written up in the *Frontier News*. It’s fair to say you might even appear in the Capital on that there Capital Channel they’ve got.”

“Frontier News . . . The Capital . . . Capital Channel . . .”

Annette’s murmuring carried an undisguised lust for fame.

“What’s it going to be?” D inquired flatly.

“I see,” Annette said with a sober nod. “You simply cannot send that child off alone, can you?”

“Well, of course not. Set one foot out of town, and the place is crawling with monsters, wild animals, and pseudo-Nobility. A kid alone can’t deal with that. He’s got to have traveling companions who can be trusted.”

The sheriff put special emphasis on the “trusted” part.

Pikk grinned.

“Well, when you put it that way,” Annette said, making a put-upon face, “I accept—however, should he prove the slightest impediment to our journey, I will cut him loose on the spot.”

“That’s fine.”

The sheriff nodded deeply and gave Annette a quick V sign. Though the sign of victory in this case meant that things had gone well for him, it didn’t register with Annette. She was quietly envisioning herself not only gaining notice across the entire Frontier, but also gracing monitors in the Capital.

“Where’s that horse at?” Pikk asked ebulliently.

“It’s hitched out in front of my office. It’s the sorrel. There’s a blanket and three days’ rations, too.”

“What about weapons? I’m thinking a revolver or a laser rifle sure would be nice.”

The sheriff scowled at him, and Pikk slowly backed away. The way he did it without even seeming to move his feet made passers-by bug their eyes.

Not even bothering to watch the diminutive figure dash off, D said to Annette, “Let’s go,” and started walking toward the cyborg horses.

Though Annette eventually followed after him, her narcissism hadn’t waned in the least, and she stood unusually straight and tall as she did so.

“A surprisingly predictable girl,” the hoarse voice remarked in a tone that carried laughter.

Before they passed through the back gate, Pikk’s horse caught up to them.

“Well, this is where I set out for a new life. Let’s drink to that!” the boy said, riding up between the two of them as if it were the most natural thing in the world and thrusting a bottle of liquor from his saddlebags at Annette.

“What? That’s disgusting! Don’t offer me a bottle of your backwash.”

“Don’t be that way. This booze might be cheap, but it’s a real find. It’s plenty good.”

“Be that as it may, I don’t want any. And I’m warning you here and now, if I even once catch you drunk, we’ll part company on the spot. Is that understood?”

“Okay, I guess,” Pikk said, pursing his lips purposefully. “But without me around, you won’t be hitting viewscreens in the Capital.”

“Just what’s that supposed to mean?!”Annette shouted, her entire face tinged with vermilion. “Do you think I brought you along because I want to be famous?”

“Why did you, then?”

That just went to show that children are unfamiliar with the adult concept of tact.

Annette went wild. Her finger aimed between the boy’s eyes, she bellowed, “All right, the next time you insult me . . .”

“Next time, next time! You don’t have to put up with it if you don’t wanna. Hell, boot me out right now. Heh heh, I’ll just follow along behind you anyway.”

“Why, you . . .”

“That’s enough of that.”

One remark from D, riding to Pikk’s right, was enough to silence the pair. It felt like being dunked in icy waters.

For a while they continued down the road in silence, but Pikk finally regained his nerve and thrust the hand with the liquor bottle in it at D.

“Will you drink to me?”

D accepted it without a word, and the boy’s face, still retaining some innocence, beamed with joy.

“Just knock it right back and take a big ol’ swig.”

D did indeed “knock it right back.” The boy watched in amazement as the bottle’s contents swiftly dwindled. The Hunter returned the empty bottle without saying anything.

Taking it, Pikk wore a dazed expression as he said, “That stuff was ‘Serpent Slayer’ . . . And you . . . in one gulp . . . You’re gonna die!”

“Got a light?” a hoarse voice inquired.

Now beyond astonished and in an almost mesmerized state, Pikk pulled a small lighter from the pocket of his trousers.

D’s left hand came up, palm forward.

“Huh?”

Not only did Pikk furrow his brow, but Annette did as well. There was no telling what this gorgeous Hunter would do. He was a being incomprehensible to a girl of good breeding.

“Spark it up. Yeah, right there—in front of my hand,” said the hoarse voice.

Iron scraped stone, and a small flame ignited. An instant later, that became a massive fiery bloom.

“Whoa!” Pikk exclaimed, leaning back, and Annette backed away too far, to the point where she almost fell out of the saddle.

“What the hell, mister . . . You can blow fire from your hand?” Pikk groaned, the smell of alcohol still lingering in the air.

“Just a bit of entertainment,” the hoarse voice cackled, but it wasn’t enough to anger the little scamp.

Eyes invested with a glow of wonder and surprise, he said, “That’s excellent—just the best! Who in the hell are you, anyway?”

“Good question. Were you surprised?” the hoarse voice asked, a ring of pride

to its words.

The second the boy heard that, his expression grew brazen. “Sheesh. Think that’s all it takes to impress me? You’re selling me short, pal. And I’ve got a thing or two to say about how it’s gonna be from here on out. Don’t try getting bossy, you hear?”

As the boy hastily pulled away from the other riders, D didn’t so much as look at him, though the hoarse voice remarked, “Interesting brat. Someone like him could come in handy, if used right. Of course, him and the princess here are, as the saying goes, like chalk and—”

“Cheese.”

Making another puzzled face, Annette looked at the Hunter. Quickly turning forward again, she muttered something to herself so that D wouldn’t hear it.

“A fine journey this is! My only companions are a guard who doesn’t recognize his employer as such and an ill-mannered brat. I expect a bit more consideration in the future. And who’s he to call me cheese? He’s got a face as cold as a robot’s.”

And in that manner, the group left town.

III

“Hey! Heeeeeeeeey!”

The voice that echoed from the darkness grew nearer as D and his companions advanced.

“What the hell’s that?” said Pikk, turning a sharp eye in that direction. Having been through worse trouble than most adults, the boy had a pistol in his right hand.

D halted his steed. The other two followed his example.

“Who’s there?” inquired D.

After a sufficient gap, from about thirty yards away came the reply, “A traveler—only I’ve hurt my leg and can’t walk.”

“Really? Sounds mighty suspicious,” Pikk jeered. “How’d you get injured? And

where were you headed?”

“My horse got attacked by a desert snake and bolted. That’s when I got thrown. My right knee’s all smashed up.”

“What about your horse?”

“Run off.”

“Just when was all this?”

“Been here since noon—you’re just a kid, aren’t you?”

“Yeah, that’s the word around town.”

“When did it happen?”

This time D asked. His voice was shot through with steel rebar.

“Just a little while ago, I said. I’m begging you. Take me as far as the town of Pekoe.”

“You’ll slow us down,” D said matter-of-factly.

Pikk nodded. He appeared to share the Hunter’s indifference toward other people.

“Oh, that’s right . . . You’ll be rewarded for your trouble.”

“Wow, that’s a different matter, then,” Pikk said, wholly unlike D in the way he now grinned from ear to ear.

“We don’t have a horse for you. Give it two or three days, and someone should pass this way.”

“Hey, that’s mighty cold of you. I thought the rule of the road was that in times of trouble, we’re supposed to help one another?” The man’s voice was tinged with anger.

“Well, we’re in a hurry.”

D started forward again.

“Please, wait. There’s a hydra’s lair around here. Hell, it’ll swallow me whole. Please, you’ve got to help me.”

“Wait, D,” said Annette. Maybe she didn’t like traveling through the night, or

perhaps she'd just held her tongue this long, but as if she'd finally had enough she told him, "I'm ordering you as your employer. You're to allow this person to accompany us."

"He might be the enemy."

"That's preposterous. You mean to say they've already caught up to us? That couldn't possibly be the case. If they have, it's through an error in judgment on your part. I'll discharge you on the spot."

D's next words made Annette go pale.

"Wise call. Well, I'll be on my way, then."

"Wait." The voice sounded flustered. "There's only the three of you. If you pull out now, a woman and child won't be able to do much. And I'm in tough shape, too. Please, just patch things up and take me with you! I've got a wife and kids waiting back home for me." The voice had become a whimper.

"Got any weapons?" D inquired.

"O-oh. Just a knife. The rest were on my horse when it—"

"In that case, toss it over here. Then you can ride on the kid's horse."

"Thanks a million! I'm much obliged."

The knife promptly sailed over, sheath and all. Catching it, D drew the blade. After quickly running his eyes down it, he slid it back into its sheath.

"What's your name?"

"Oh, they call me Hiryuu. Pleased to meet you."

The three riders advanced.

The voice belonged to a short man who was terribly skinny. He was also rather young.

"What's with this joker. Looks like a strong wind would blow him away!" Pikk remarked without reservation.

With a wry grin, the man conceded he was right. He got on behind Pikk, and soon after they galloped forward he said with interest, "So you're in a hurry, and with a motley crew like this—you folks sure must be mixed up in something."

“Shut your trap. Don’t be so quick to shoot your mouth off after we went and saved you,” Pikk snarled. He didn’t like having to ride double. It was even worse that he had a guy wrapping his arms around his waist. The boy was just beginning to wonder if they’d be able to ditch him somewhere when D’s left hand went up.

Something came down from overhead with flapping wings to land on the back of his hand. Pikk recognized it as a hawk. He could see pretty well in the dark, and the moon was also bright.

Racing along beside the boy, Annette asked, “What’s that?”

“It’s a messenger hawk.”

“Huh? He told me it died!”

“He must’ve bought another one. That bastard keeps a lot of secrets, don’t he?”

“He sure does.”

As the two of them glared at D, who rode on ahead, the man calling himself Hiryuu watched them with a look of special interest.

“No fair side-tracking.”

It was the hoarse voice.

Hiryuu’s eyes bugged. D didn’t even turn around. Pikk and Annette looked at each other. D deviating from the set route was beyond surprising; it was downright mysterious. He wasn’t supposed to be like that.

“Where are we going?” the voice inquired with trepidation.

“Dakilysil Valley. I have to meet someone.”

“Pretty dangerous place, that. Home to monsters.”

“All the more reason to go there.”

“Whaaaaat?!”

“I don’t want to go to any such place. Explain yourself,” cried Annette.

“What, are you stupid?” the hoarse voice sneered. “He said he has to meet

someone. Someone who's indispensable for keeping the lot of you safe!"

The world of early morning was clear but lacking in verisimilitude, as if it were being viewed through a glass. And the narrow road the three horses took, as well as the boulder and cliffs to either side, looked somehow cold and distant. For the world's life had only just begun.

"I wonder why we're going this way," Annette said loudly enough so she'd be overheard as she eyed the boulders to either side. "From up top any wild animal could—"

With a gasp, her voice retreated down her throat.

At the very top of the enormous boulder to their left, a dull yellow creature covered with needle-like spines had appeared. A base growl reached the ears of all present.

"Son of a bitch!" Pikk exclaimed, reaching for the pistol on his hip.

"Don't."

D's quiet command stopped him.

"Why not? That thing's—"

As the beast braced itself to pounce, Pikk cocked the hammer of his gun. Even after the beast fell from the rock in the same pose, he kept the weapon's muzzle trained on it.

Intently watching what were clearly the beast's death throes, he said, "It's been shot."

"That's an armored needleback. Look, it's missing the needles on part of its back. Must've got off an attack of its own. In concentration, their needles can shatter rock, so even professional huntsmen go after them from long range with rifles. That's probably what killed this one."

"It was no ordinary gun," said Hiryuu.

"What makes you say that?"

"From the look of the blood, it looks to have just been shot. But did any of you hear any gunfire?"

“Come to mention it, no,” Pikk snorted. “But that wound ain’t from no arrow, or crossbow, or even a sword. I can’t see it being anything but a gunshot. Say, is there any such thing as a firearm that don’t make any noise?”

“There are if you count the Nobility’s weapons.”

The hoarse voice’s reply sounded terribly distant.

D and Annette’s horses had already started forward.

THE ARMS DEALER

chapter 4

I

“Wait a sec, you bastard,” Pikk said, he and Hiryuu trying frantically to keep pace, and when the narrow path took a turn to the right they finally caught up. The other two horses had halted, and D and Annette stared ahead without saying a word. It was strange the way they didn’t move a muscle.

“What is it?” the boy asked, but even before he’d finished the question a heavy odor prickled his nose.

The wind had changed direction. The stench carried on the breeze blowing their way now made Pikk cough, and even a grown man like Hiryuu held his nose. That Annette sat there without doing anything seemed most unusual.

“Wh-what the hell?! This smell—it’s blood!” Pikk said, advancing on his horse to Annette’s side, and that was when he finally looked ahead. “Wh-wh-wh—” was all he could say as he, like the other two, froze.

Behind him, Hiryuu said in his stead, “What the hell is this?” And then he too stopped moving.

Up ahead there spread a vast square. The square was stained with red. So great was the quantity of blood that Pikk got the feeling it’d even tinged the very air with vermilion. The cause was obvious. Monsters and supernatural beasts beyond numbering covered the cobblestoned expanse of ground. All of them were dead or dying. Though the chests or flanks of some of them still rose and fell, the breathing was so weak it would clearly soon be at an end, and such individuals were extremely few and far between.

Blood still ran from bodies of every conceivable hue, and it wasn’t always red. Apparently they were also of varying natures, with white, black, or even purplish smoke rising here and there, and on closer examination those bodies or exoskeletons were so dissolved by their powerfully acidic blood that almost no

semblance of their former shape remained.

As the wind picked up it carried the stench, leaving both Pikk and Hiryuu covering their mouths. While D was another matter altogether, it was strange how Annette—just a regular person like them—kept holding her reins the same as always.

The supernatural creatures were facing their way almost in a straight row, but closer to the center of the square more and more of them were facing the opposite direction.

“At first they all attacked en masse, and then later they tried to run,” Hiryuu murmured in a deeply impressed tone.

A horrified look on his face, Pikk said, “Tried to run? Why?”

“The better question is, from what?”

“From what, then?”

“Whatever was in the middle of the square.”

“Huh?”

At the very moment Pikk furrowed his brow, from somewhere in the center of the square hidden by the mound of corpses a yellowish light began to rise magnificently, trailing white smoke behind it. After rising roughly fifty yards it lost speed and, leaving a graceful arc in its wake, began to fall.

“It’ll be close,” Pikk squeaked.

“Real close,” Hiryuu attested.

Suddenly, Pikk noticed something.

“Son of a bitch, the point of impact is *right here*!” Tapping Annette on the shoulder, he shouted, “Run for it!”

However, the boy didn’t try to escape. For Annette had slumped casually to one side.

“Did you just go and faint?!” Pikk said in disbelief, leaning over in his saddle to grab Annette by the collar and pull her upright again. “Hey, snap out of it!” he said, shaking her by the shoulder, and the girl opened her eyes.

“Head hurts . . . What’s wrong?”

“The sky’s falling. Get going!”

Not even leaving Annette a second to be surprised, he gave a kick to the rump of her horse and sent it after D, following along after at a gallop.

Are we gonna make it? He thought they were too late in getting their start.

The wind whistled overhead. It told them it’d fallen right behind them.

Pikk closed his eyes.

The sound of an explosion shook his eardrums. It was less spectacular than he’d expected.

“Huh?”

There was no rocking of the earth, no heaven-shaking boom. The explosion continued. *Bang-ba-bang-bang!*

Looking back, the boy saw a prismatic light bouncing around on the ground. Halting his steed, Pikk wheeled around.

“What the hell? Firecrackers?” he groaned.

D was beside him.

Did this big jerk know that’s what it was? If he did, who threw the firecrackers?

“Hello there!” a wrinkly voice called out from the center of the corpse-littered square. It was that of a woman.

Pikk and Hiryuu’s eyes went wide.

“Came after all, did you, D? I’ve been waiting.”

D said nothing in response to her friendly greeting. His dark eyes still reflected the countless dead.

Turning toward Pikk, the Hunter said, “Our employer’s racing off at breakneck speed. Better bring her back, and fast.”

“Well, I don’t take orders from you,” the boy grumbled, yet undoubtedly her safety was of paramount concern to him.

However, before Pikk could comply with D's directive, Annette seemed to have gotten the situation in hand, riding her cyborg horse back with trepidation.

What halted her was the sharp rasp of a discharge. The wall of corpses was probably the only thing that'd kept it from spraying them.

From the other side of the wall a little old woman in a green and brown camouflage outfit was rising straight in the air. The silver box on her back must've had an exhaust nozzle somewhere to the rear where the group couldn't see. Beneath her, the air churned and eddied.

"What the hell is this old lady?"

Pikk bared his teeth.

The old woman also showed her teeth as she grabbed a lever projecting out in front of her from the box.

"Is she coming at us?"

Though Pikk drew his firearm, the old woman still grinned as she started to climb, swiftly reaching an altitude of over a hundred yards, where she looked down at the people on the ground as if she were a glaring god.

"What the—?"

A tinge of turbulence shook her deeply wrinkled face. The hand grasping the lever moved feverishly.

"What's the problem with Grandma—can't she get back down?"

D raised his left hand.

"Push the left lever forward," a hoarse voice called out. "Then a quick shove to the right. Make it snappy!"

It was a few seconds later that the old woman began a slow descent. Until she vanished behind the pile of corpses, her face was etched with a glum expression.

To the rear of the mountain of corpses a fairly wide path had been left, possibly as a means of escape. As for why it was so wide—in the center of a thirty-foot clearing was parked a metallic wagon. It wasn't horse-drawn. There was a cylinder as long as two horses hitched end to end that had wheels

attached to it, while the top—what would've been the horses' backs—had white vapor rising from it. The holes in its top were arranged in two rows of six each, which discharged surplus steam generated within the cylinder.

This was something many a Frontier farmer coveted—a steam-driven wagon. As the vehicle to the rear was a covered wagon, they couldn't see inside, but from the size of it, it seemed it could haul quite a bit of cargo and still have room to bed down inside it.

Having set down the jetpack she'd had on her back, the old woman flexed her shoulders and looked up at the four riders. "Welcome," she said, holding the hem of her long, flowery skirt as she curtseyed.

"Why the big show and dance?" Annette asked D in a hushed tone.

"That's how she greets customers."

"Customers?"

"That's right, and a good one at that—isn't that right, D?"As she looked at him, her face, covered with wrinkles and age spots, melted with rapture. "And what business have you today? Why call Granny Gerheit all the way out to this dangerous place? If you're looking for something cheap, you'll feel my wrath!"

At her feet fell a single glittering disk. It made a hard metallic *ching!*

"A-ha, generous as always, I see."

Bracing one hand on the small of her back, Granny Gerheit made a great production of picking up the gold coin. After a glance at it, she grinned and said, "A thousand dalas Aristocrat Coin—what were you planning on doing, starting a war or something?"

Hers was a daring smile.

D said, "First, I'd like you to implant a tracking chip in the girl."

"Shouldn't be a problem."

"The rest we'll discuss in private."

D got off his horse. He must've had plans he wasn't going to share with the rest of his traveling companions.

“Damn, that’s cold of him,” Pikk spat venomously.

Hiryuu clapped him on the shoulder. “We should dismount, too. My ass is killing me.”

As soon as he was down off the horse, Pikk asked the old woman headed to the covered wagon with D, “Say, Granny, did you take down all these monsters?”

“Must’ve been pretty hungry, eh?” she replied. “Came at me from all sides just to eat an old woman who’s nothing but skin and bones. Only they bit off more than they could chew.”

“How’d you swing it?” the boy inquired, his voice trembling with anticipation.

The old woman said nothing, but pointed down by the boy’s feet.

A weapon that looked to be an old-fashioned firearm had been unceremoniously dumped there. A tin box sat to its right, and a belt of ammunition was feeding into the top of the weapon. Pikk’s eyes went wide at the unusually large barrel of the gun.

“The safety’s on. Have a look at it if you like,” she told him magnanimously, and then the old woman ducked behind the covered wagon.

“An odd little group you’ve got there.”

“Hired on as a bodyguard,” said the hoarse voice.

Plainly knitting her brow, the old woman remarked, “Still got *that thing* stuck on you? Just go ahead and lop it off and throw it in the volcano up on Mount Ring, why don’t you?” she spat.

“One of these days,” D replied, seeming a bit amused.

“Hmph!” the left hand groaned, perhaps having decided that the Hunter wasn’t necessarily joking.

II

Throwing the cover back, the old woman invited the Hunter to clamber into the wagon.

“Go on, pick out whatever you like,” Granny Gerheit said as she pulled off the

cloth covering a mound of cargo as if she were a robber stealing the very clothes off someone's back. The smell of gun oil that already permeated the wagon's interior assailed their nostrils with renewed strength. Most of the weapons revealed had a bluish sheen.

"You're traveling in a hurry, no doubt. Tell me the itch you've got that needs scratching. I'll pick something out for you," Granny Gerheit said, slapping the palm of her hand against the barrel of a rifle.

"The girl needs an automatic weapon she can maneuver with one hand and fire without worrying about the kick. Plus a pair of little pistols she can hide up her sleeves, and the rubber belts to hold them in place."

"Roger that."

Slipping between two oversized pieces of merchandise, Granny Gerheit pulled out a slender gun. The foot-long barrel was attached to another eight inches or so of weapon, with an iron rectangular box set just in front of the grip.

"Oh, this is a good one. Way back when, I hear they called these submachine guns. Weighs roughly three and a half pounds, fires one hundred twenty rounds of 1.2 mm ammo. The muzzle's small, and you can't aim it long range like a rifle, but it'll hit any target within fifty yards, no matter how small. Might take you a hundred rounds to do it, is all. As long as you're pulling the trigger, bullets come out. I don't care if you're the worst shot in the world, you can probably kill thirty people before you empty the magazine."

Seeing D's nod, she lowered the gun, then held out a pair of pistols she'd pulled out at the same time, placing one on either palm of the Hunter's hands.

"These two are the same model, only loaded with different types of ammo. The one in your right hand has armor-piercing rounds like the gun I just showed you, and the one in your left has explosive rounds. Thirty rounds in each. The armor-piercing one could cut through five normal people, or two people in the sort of class A armor your garden-variety warrior favors. On the explosive rounds, first you've got the outer layer—they're covered with a ceramic coating which could get about four inches deep going through the armored hide of something like a mid-sized fire dragon. Once inside, how do I put this, they go off with as much bang as a large Merovingian grenade. That'll put said mid-sized fire dragon out

of commission, and a person—well, it'll probably blow the sucker into four separate pieces."

"Fine," said D.

The hoarse voice shouted, "Watch yourself, the old lady's a homicidal maniac!"

"Hush, you miserable squatter," Granny Gerheit shot back. "Now, for the other two. Which one's next?" she asked, giving the Hunter a smile.

D shook his head.

"Oh, don't want anything, then?"

"That's right," D replied.

Weapons in hand, D was just about to get out of the wagon when it rocked violently.

"That's gunfire! The enemy?" the old woman said, crouching down and reaching for a nearby gun, but D shook his head. The old woman nodded back. She'd figured out what'd happened.

The two of them got out of the wagon.

With the gun Granny Gerheit had shown him in hand, Pikk wore a perplexed expression.

"What's going on here?" Granny Gerheit inquired with feigned anger, having already grasped the situation.

"I don't know. I was just messing around with it, and all of a sudden bullets are coming outta it. What's with this gun? It doesn't make any noise at all when it goes off!"

The boy was the very picture of befuddlement.

"That's a weapon I found in an armory in ruins so ancient they go back to before the Nobility. See, the barrel's got this tube on it that kills the sound. Apparently in the ancient language it was called a 'mufflerizer' or 'super-essor' or something like that. Just the weapon for taking out multiple targets at range before they even notice you. Only this time, it proved a little dangerous," said the old woman, seeming somewhat embarrassed as she looked around at the

monster corpses.

“What was dangerous about it?” Pikk asked, intrigued.

“Well, a lot of monsters are pretty big cowards, and most are likely to run at so much as the sound of a gun going off. But this one’s silent, so even though their buddies were getting picked off, they didn’t realize what was happening. The attacks just kept coming and coming. It was only after two-thirds of them had been slain that the rest finally turned tail. And by that point, I’d got a taste for blood, you see. Damned if I was gonna let them monsters get away, and all that.”

Pikk didn’t say a word as he gazed at the agitated old woman. *Ol’ Granny’s lost her mind*, his eyes said.

Suddenly someone said what he was thinking.

“What a lot of savages you are. I can’t stand it any longer.”

Annette, who’d been sitting on a round rock by the steam-driven engine, got up, drawing the stares of all. D’s were emotionless. Granny Gerheit’s seemed intrigued. Pikk looked disgusted. And Hiryuu had a faint smile on his face.

“D, why must we come to such a filthy, brutish place? And is your business concluded?”

“It’s done.”

“In that case, let’s hurry up and be on our way. The stink is so bad I’m fairly suffocating!”

“Okay. But before you mount up, take these.”

“Huh?”

Annette dubiously eyed what D had tucked under his arm. He dropped the iron weapons at her feet.

“What’s all this?”

“Weapons for your own protection. I’ll show you how to use them.”

“You must be joking. I never had to carry anything so vulgar back in the Capital!”

“This is the Frontier.”

The girl stalled for a few seconds, trying to turn the situation around. And in that gap, she found a course that suited her perfectly.

“I realize that—but protecting me is *your* job, isn’t it? Telling me to do it myself is a dereliction of duty. It’s a violation of our contract. And you call yourself a Hunter?!”

“Yeah, unfortunately,” said the hoarse voice.

“Gracious. Don’t change your voice every time it suits you. Is that supposed to mean something special?”

“No.”

“Ohhhh,” Annette fumed, crimson with anger. You could say she practically ballooned with it. Body quaking, she shouted, “You, sir, are fired! I’m terminating you here and now—is that understood?”

“Fine,” the hoarse voice replied with what sounded like delight. “It’s an honor. But you’ve gotta pay me my wages through today!”

“I have to what?!”

“I have to what?! I have to what?!” the hoarse voice mimicked shrilly.

Granny Gerheit sputtered, and Pikk exploded with laughter.

Annette had gone beyond red, her whole body purple with rage as the voice continued, “It’s only fair. You had us working for you up till today, didn’t you? So, we’ll say we’ve gone a third of the way—”

“You must be joking. Who in their right mind would pay a worthless—”

It was unclear what Annette intended to say next, and they never did find out. For she had just looked over at Granny Gerheit.

The old woman’s face, staring at her with disbelief, was the product of fear.

“What is it? What’s wrong, Granny?”

It took the old woman a few seconds to respond to the girl’s query.

“I’ve never . . . Do you have any idea . . . exactly who . . . you just called

‘worthless’?”

Even having said that much, the old woman’s fear hadn’t dissolved. She’d just listened to a complaint *about D*.

Annette couldn’t understand the crone’s sudden, quiet madness.

“I know. Of course I do. I said it to *him*.” Her finger took aim at the icy figure of beauty dressed in black.

“Really . . . Frightening how little some folks know . . . D, sure you haven’t mellowed too much now? You’ll get into heaven when you die.”

Silence pressed in on them from all sides. A gust of wind stirred the air, leaving everyone but D holding their nose and coughing.

When that had finally died down, Annette declared, “At any rate, I have no intention of paying good money for lackluster work.”

Once more sounding delighted, the hoarse voice said, “Have it your way. So, you planning on making the rest of the trip alone?”

“No. I’ve already decided on my next bodyguard.”

“Oh?”

The expressions of all present said they shared this surprise.

Annette turned in the boy’s direction.

“Huh?” On Pikk’s face, surprise, nervousness, and expectation all intertwined.

“I’d like to ask you to do it, Mr. Hiryuu.”

“Me?” The drifter furrowed his brow. Looking at D, he said, “But—”

“You’ll take the job, won’t you?” the girl continued. “I promise you’ll be compensated. If you see me home safely.”

This wasn’t exactly a request but rather a declaration accompanied by a glare, and for a moment Hiryuu had an angry look in his eye, but he quickly came back with a smile. “I don’t know if I’ll be as reliable as our handsome friend there, but if you’re fine with me I’ll help you out.”

“Good,” Annette said, but she didn’t even smile. “In that case—you, give him

your horse," she ordered.

"What are you talking about?" Pikk countered. "The sheriff got this horse for me. You don't get to order me around!"

"The condition for that was that I take you with me, wasn't it? Hurry up and give him the horse. I'm elated at the thought of not having to breathe your stench any longer."

"Listen to you run your mouth, you tramp!"

"What did you just say?!" Annette snarled, baring her teeth.

"Now, now," Granny Gerheit said, getting between them. "No need to fight about a little thing like a horse. Just consult ol' Granny Gerheit, the 'Traveling Armory.' If it's a horse you need, I can fix you right up. Only I don't have any cheap ones."

"Any cheap ones? I don't see any horses at all," Annette said, an unsettled look on her face. Her expression seemed to ask, *Why am I constantly surrounded by nothing but lunatics?*

"Oh, I have them. I'll set one up now. Just a minute."

Her disturbing grin growing deeper, the old woman circled around behind the covered wagon.

"Hey, mister," Pikk called back over his shoulder to Hiryuu. "You serious about seeing the girl home? She has some major issues!"

"Oh, now that sounds interesting. I may not look it, but in the past I worked as a bouncer in a saloon, and as a sheriff. I'm used to the rough stuff."

"You really don't look it," the hoarse voice said. Indeed, the man's unusually thin frame didn't seem at all suited to "the rough stuff." The hoarse voice continued, "Seemed like too much trouble so I didn't ask—but what are you?"

"Just an ordinary drifter," Hiryuu replied curtly.

"With a build like yours, you'll wind up a snack for some monster before you've drifted too far on the Frontier. What kind of power have you got?"

"Power? None to speak of," Hiryuu said, shrugging his shoulders.

Of course, the man was actually “the flying demon” Hiki, one of the Hunters hired by the mayor of Krishken—Annette’s father.

III

Having passed over Calico four days before his earthbound compatriots, Hiki witnessed D’s encounter with the Nobles atop the pass—and was continuing his surveillance when he was forced to do battle with a bizarre flying object launched by one of the Nobles on the ground. Though he destroyed his opponent, the “wind suit” he needed to fly was damaged, forcing him to drop a highly efficient bomb and level the entire hill.

Desperately trying to maneuver his out-of-control wind suit, Hiki managed a crash landing at the spot where D and the others later encountered him. His whole body was battered by the emergency landing, leaving him unable to move at all for a full day, lending credence to the story he spun about being a drifter whose horse had run off and helping to fool D and the others, although D’s indifference to the new arrival also played a large part.

Having easily gained permission to travel with them, Hiki’s phenomenal luck made him arrogant enough to think it would be a simple matter to abduct Annette. However, he soon realized why D could be so indifferent, and the man’s terror couldn’t be denied. Instinct told him that if he tried anything funny, he’d be killed. And it would come without a second’s pause to explain himself the very instant D became wise to him.

He immediately abandoned any plans of abducting Annette. At the same time, Hiki maintained his ruse of being an upstanding traveling companion, deciding to entrust his own fate to D as well. There were two deeply rooted reasons for this. First, for someone like him who traveled the Frontier with no blade but the dagger on his belt, he could wish for no greater bodyguard than D. Next, if by some chance D were slain, making off with Annette would become easy enough. Toward that end he’d need to repair his wind suit and reclaim his weapon. It would take time, but he needed to do it quickly and in utmost secrecy. In other words, without D suspecting anything was amiss.

And then the problem of D’s dismissal and his own promotion to bodyguard had presented itself. Like a game bird so foolish it doesn’t even know it’s only for

sport and never notices the importance of the protection the hawk has afforded it, she had flown right into the waiting arms of the huntsman, but Hiki was at a loss. The reason went without saying. He, too, was now bereft of D's protection.

Nevertheless, he'd instantly reconsidered because two days would suffice to repair his wind suit, and he'd be able to make off with Annette without any interference from D. While D was around, there was precious little chance of abducting the girl, but if Annette sent him packing, there'd be no problem at all. Those two days would be a dangerous time to weather, but fortunately they'd run into the arms dealer. If Hiki could get weapons enough to hold them for two days, the rest of the trip could be done by air. A normal person like Annette was too heavy to carry home in one day, but two days seemed manageable. Though the Nobles' flying object worried him, he didn't think they'd have many of those. At any rate, as long as Annette was away from D, he'd manage something. Hiki was sure of that.

"Step forward," D told him.

Ice water raced down his spine. "What for?" he asked, and it was all he could do to keep his voice from trembling.

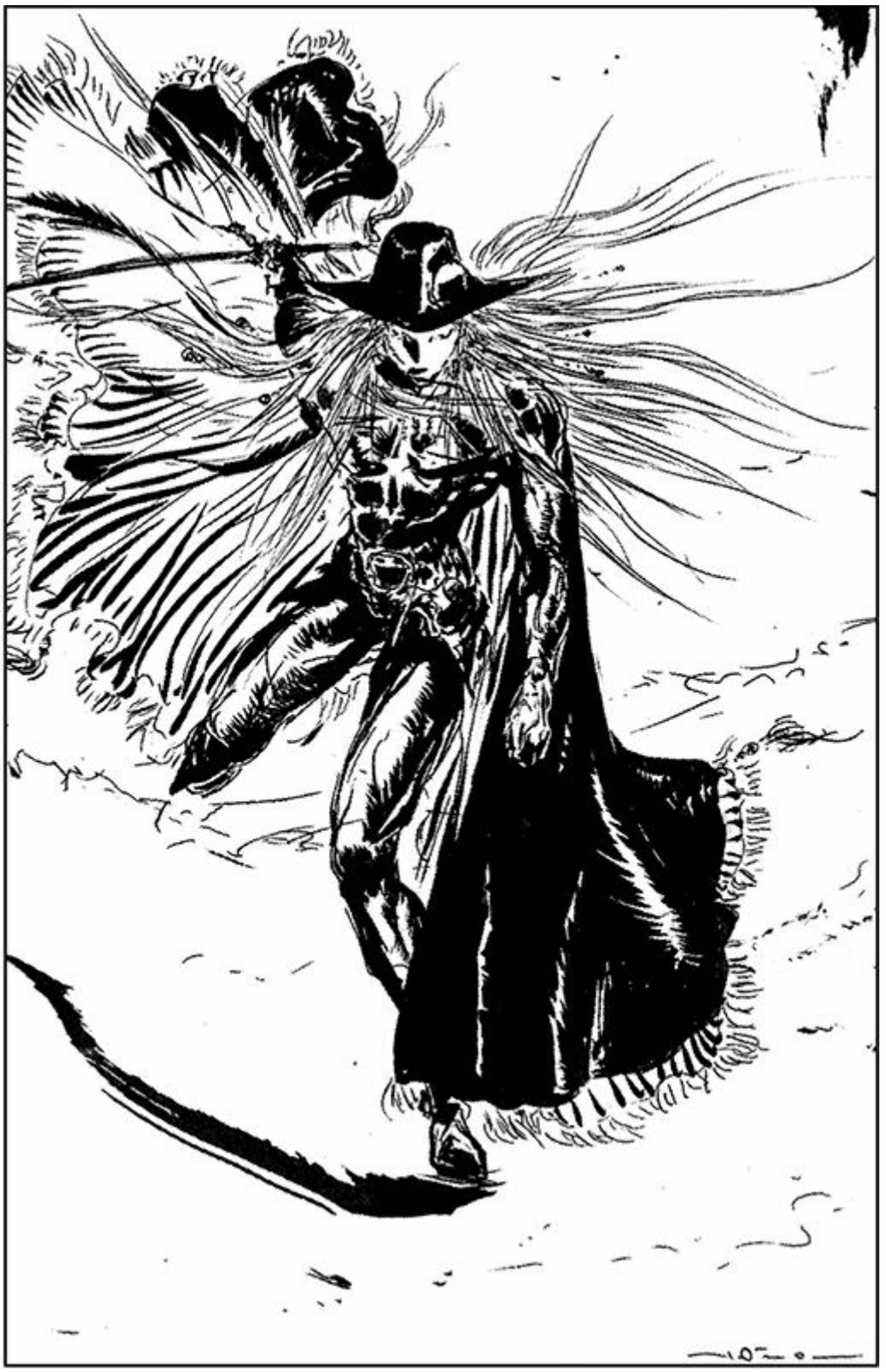
There was no reply. D was gazing at him. Rather than fill him with fear, those impossibly deep eyes stirred an action more dangerous than Hiki realized, and the man walked forward.

Before he could stop, a stark gleam made a horizontal swipe at him. Hiki didn't say a word, but leaped a good ten feet to the side to avoid the deadly blow.

"Oh, that's an unusual way of dodging you've got," said the hoarse voice.

D's blade was already back in its sheath.

Hiki dropped weakly to his knees. Anyone could well imagine what the result of a second slash by the Hunter would've been, and the man breathed a sigh of relief.



D said, “Get him a horse.”

“Yessir.”

Granny Gerheit walked over to her wagon. Not only relieved, she seemed positively saved. The young man known as D had the power to freeze the blood of even those who weren’t directly involved.

In no time at all, the old woman had loaded a bizarre item onto a hand truck and wheeled it back. It was a metal cylinder a foot and a half in diameter and about three feet long. When she stopped the hand truck, all but D were watching suspiciously, but the old woman smiled back as if they were showering the item with admiration.

“Well, here’s your new horse,” she said, opening a cover near the top of the cylinder and pushing the button within. A single motor-like sound came from within the cylinder. A moment later legs that were folded inside appeared, forming joints as they straightened out, while the front of the cylinder rose at an angle. Apparently that was the head.

On seeing how the top of the cylinder—its body—subsided, Pikk bugged his eyes and said, “It’s even got a seat! What more could you ask for?”

“Not a cyborg horse, but a completely automated mecha horse,” Granny Gerheit said, proudly slapping the barrel of the beast. “No different in speed or performance from your average racehorse, but a thousand times easier to handle! What’s more, you just need to gas her up once a month, and no feed bills. Only needs maintenance once every ten years, too. All for the incredibly low price of a thousand dalas.”

“I’ll take it. And pay in cash,” Annette said, raising her right hand.

“Oh my.”

“That’s highway robbery.”

All eyes turned to the source of those words. It was D.

“Wh-wh-wh—” Granny Gerheit stammered guiltily. “What are you talking about? That’s more than I have to take even from you!”

“I saw the same horse last year in the village of Calva. It was five hundred dalas.”

“Hmph!” Granny Gerheit backed up, murder on her face. Sweat pouring from her brow, the old woman said, “The price of everything shoots through the roof this time of year.”

“You ol’ swindler,” Pikk snarled.

Ignoring him, the old woman said, “Nine hundred dalas.”

“Too high. Five-fifty,” Annette replied. Here she showed herself for a daughter of the Frontier. Those brought up out there knew better than to waste money.

“Nine hundred dalas.”

“Six hundred.”

“Eight-fifty.”

“Six-thirty.”

“All right,” Hiki interrupted, sick of the whole business. “*I’ll* buy it. How does seven-fifty sound?”

Granny Gerheit folded her arms. For two or three seconds she maintained her scowl, then said, “Well, I guess I don’t have much choice, do I?”

“Oh, you had money on you?” Pikk said, staring at Hiki moodily.

“Yeah, I’m a reliable guy.”

“So, you’re a drifter hoping to open a dry goods store in the future or something? Oh, it’s so *cold*.”

“Nothing else matters so long as you can pay cash. Anyway, it’s sold. Anything else you might be wanting?” Granny Gerheit asked, her face breaking into a smile.

“Just one thing more.”

“Oh, just one, eh?” The old woman was visibly displeased.

“I want one of those personal-sized portable bunkers the Nobility used.”

Everyone’s eyes bulged. Except D’s. The old woman whistled, and Pikk made a

disagreeable face. The man had crossed a line.

Sounding amazed, the hoarse voice said, “That’s a hell of a purchase—didn’t know he was so loaded. More to the point, does this wrinkly old bag even stock a portable bunker?”

“I don’t care what idiots say, you lousy parasite,” the old woman sneered. “Unlike you, I’m not so worthless I need someone else’s legs to get around. In there are weapons I’ve collected traveling all across the Frontier under my own power. All of them top-notch goods even a Noble would be glad to have.”

And five minutes later, a gleaming silver sleeping bag was tossed on the ground in front of the group. Quickly checking the circuitry and energy plate, Hiki gave a satisfied nod.

“It’s a nice one. I’ll give you three hundred thousand dalas.”

“Whaaaat?” Granny Gerheit’s jaw dropped. She’d just been ready to ask for two hundred thousand dalas. “Don’t kid me. Half a million dalas.”

“Three hundred thirty thousand.”

“Four hundred eighty thousand.”

Thinking, *Here we go again with the pointless haggling*, Pikk looked up at the sky. His expression changed. It grew tense.

“Something’s flying this way!”

Hinting at evening, the sky was heavy with a deep blue. To the east, a black spot was definitely visible. It was drawing closer.

Hiki was the first to recognize it. However, he couldn’t very well say that, nor did he have any intention of telling them.

“I’m not sure what it is,” said the man, “but I think we’d best haul ass out of here. Now if you’ll excuse me, I’m gone!”

“Nope,” said the old woman.

“Not gonna make it in time,” the hoarse voice said.

Hiki grabbed Annette’s hand and dashed toward the personal bunker. A clod of dirt that sprang up right in front of him halted his run.

“Your money first!” shouted the old woman, standing there like some angry temple guardian with a pair of revolvers she’d had hidden on her somewhere.

Even as he opened the saddlebag over his shoulder and pulled out a wad of bills, Hiki kept his glare trained on the sky above. The black flying object sort of looked like a toy that was no more than three wings strung together.

“D, what are you going to do?” the old woman asked as she moved toward her wagon.

“Take care of him,” he replied, pushing Pikk toward her, and then with a light kick off the ground D sailed out beyond the barricade of corpses.

Perhaps noting D as he jogged toward the center of the square, the flying object changed direction slightly.

Not even going for his blade, D halted at his destination—the center of the square.

“Here it comes!” the left hand that’d hung limply by his side said with apparent amusement. What was it finding so enjoyable?

The instant the black object passed overhead, a gleam of light shot from D’s back. And it definitely passed right through the flying object. However, instead of being cut in two as it should’ve been, the flying object went into a steep climb that swiftly reached the stratosphere.

ASSASSIN FROM THE SKY

chapter 5

I

The body of the flying object was constructed of a wooden frame covered by metal foil. The tens of thousands of control nerves spread across the frame and foil skin were endowed with miraculous regenerative abilities. This was accomplished by a combination of magic and engineering skill. That was what allowed it to continue flying after a blow from D's blade.

From the ground all the way up to the stratosphere, a single thread stretched the entire one hundred and sixty thousand feet. This thread, like the control nerves, was the dark fruit of millennia of repeated collaborations between sorcery and technology.

Down on the surface—out in the middle of a plain about sixty miles east of the valley where D and his compatriots were—one of the galloping steeds suddenly halted.

Perhaps sensing something, from the back of another cyborg horse came the question, "What's wrong, Gorshin?"

It didn't come from a person. Rather, it issued from a black coffin secured with thick chains. The voice belonged to the person who lay inside it.

And the other horses that'd halted each bore an identical load.

"It's odd," the black coffin he'd called Gorshin responded. "It found D and moved in to attack. But his sword got a lick in first. I know this because my Flying Predator Unit has replay capabilities. However, according to communications down the command thread, a malfunction is affecting the FPU."

"What kind of malfunction?" inquired the first coffin. It belonged to the man calling himself Benelli.

"I don't know. That's why I find it odd. Now that I think of it, when it suffered his attack, I felt a chill run down my spine."

Another coffin said irritably, “Attack him, and be quick about it. No matter how unassailable he may fancy himself being on the ground, he won’t be able to fend off an attack from the air. Or are you buffeted by the winds of cowardice?”

“Someday I shall make you eat those words. And it will be too late after I’ve dropped a mini nuke on your head of curls!”

“Stop it, Gorshin and Benelli,” a third coffin interjected. From the tenor and gravity of the voice, it was immediately clear it belonged to their leader.

“As you wish, Lord Gillian,” Gorshin’s coffin said, the tone changed. There was fright in it.

“Have the FPU continue its assault. I should like to learn more about the skills of this man called D—firsthand.” This voice, too, came from a coffin.

Gorshin’s coffin fell silent. That was the work of suspicion and fear.

“But Lord Gillian . . . The FPU will only—”

“I know. Attach the control thread to me.”

Gorshin was at a loss. The air around the four coffin-bearing horses froze. The chill was generated by the reluctance of the other three.

“Gorshin.”

The soft voice shattered the ice. Still glittering, it vanished like steam.

“I understand. I shall come out now.”

The tail of Gorshin’s words overlapped with a creaking sound. Other sounds joined it, and when the fourth and final creak had ended, four figures stood beside the steeds. A hazy moon glowed in the still-deepening blue of the sky. But the moon threw no shadows at their feet.

One of them—Xeno Gillian—held out his right hand. His sleeve had been rolled up nearly to his shoulder, exposing an arm that looked terribly thin and weak.

“Gorshin.”

The figure he indicated stepped to the fore.

The man wore apparel that was dazzling even in this fragile glasswork of moonlight, and he stood before Gillian and took the man’s wrist. Beneath skin as

fair as any beauty's, blue veins could be seen. The man with the aquiline nose—Gorshin—hesitated. All eyes were focused on the wrist he held. He pressed his lips to it. An almost blinding line of vermilion streaked across the white skin.

"And now your power is mine as well," Gillian said in a voice like stone. "Now, give me the thread."

Gorshin pulled his mouth away. Licking his vermilion-stained lips once, he then grasped the index finger of his right hand with his left and tore it clean off. His complexion unchanged, he held out the finger, and, surprisingly enough, Gillian too twisted a finger off his right hand. They exchanged the digits. Then Gillian pressed Gorshin's finger against his bloody wound. That alone was enough to attach it. Not only that, but he could bend and straighten it at will. After testing that several times, Gillian gave a satisfied nod.

"The thread has been connected. Now to take the true measure of the man called D with this finger."

And saying that, he curled the finger like a claw, with not so much as a scar left at the base of it.

"It's coming back down!" the hoarse voice reported in full tension mode. D had his left hand raised up over his head. "Coming back from the stratosphere. This ain't good."

"Why go all the way up to the stratosphere?"

"Because the Nobility had bases up there. Actually, they're still around. We'd best assume it snagged something there."

"Something?"

"A bomb or missile, for starters. Oh, it's fired on us!"

D's eyes reflected the stars adorning the evening sky. Two of them were rapidly growing larger.

"It's the aura-sensing type—the oldest model, but still, once they lock on, there's no escaping 'em."

Without a sound, D kicked off the ground. Though the jump barely took him off the surface, it carried him more than thirty feet. After he'd made four such

bounds, the black missiles dropping from the sky fixed their sights on the enemy's back and immediately kicked in their boosters. Sensors set in their noses detected D's aura even as they read something massive behind him.

D was standing with his back against a rockface. His left hand reached out to his side and touched the rock. When it came away, the missiles read an aura there identical to D's own. Without the slightest hesitation the missiles went for the false D, but a split second before they could strike the rockface, D's right hand flashed into action. As one of the projectiles gouged a fiery crater in the rockface, the other one shot straight up, booster still going full throttle, and scored a direct hit on the FPU where it hovered in the stratosphere.

Both the explosion and the death of the device were relayed to the ground through the control thread. Gillian doubled over and a cry of pain escaped him.

"As I expected," Gorshin said, nodding morosely. "The transplanted control thread transmits any impacts to the person currently controlling it. Even a few nanoseconds of the condensed information is more than a living creature can bear. Even if that creature is a Noble."

In other words, for a span so brief it was practically negative time on the cosmic scale, Gillian's body had been subjected to the flames and concussion of the missile. However, as the three cousins watched in amazement, Gillian quickly rose to his feet again.

"I felt it . . . D's ability . . . To be able to destroy the sensors on a missile flying at supersonic speeds, then deflect it to score a direct hit on the FPU . . . he's a freak."

His pale, stiffened face gradually formed a horrible expression. One of malice—with a grin.

"But now . . . I recognize D's trick . . ." Gillian continued. "When we come face to face, I will surely slay him . . . Mark my words . . ."

And then his blazing eyes glared ahead. His eyes were indeed tinted crimson.

"Gorshin," he called to his cousin. "Have you the intention of making a new FPU?"

"Of course."

“How long will it take?”

“If you would give me but half a day’s time.”

“I shall give you a day.”

A surprise too raw for words swept through the group.

“But in return,” their leader continued, “make it an FPU I can ride. I believe D is not our only foe. It would seem reports of our revival have reached the ears of Krishken’s descendants. My take is that D’s involvement in this matter is purely a coincidence. In order to save the girl, her father or other relatives will have sent rescuers after her. We must do away with them before they encounter D and his party.”

“As you wish.” Gorshin put his hand to his chest and bowed.

A dauntless smile rose on a face pure with resolve.

“Okay, this is where I leave you folks,” the old woman said, throwing both hands into the air. That was a parting gesture unique to this region. “But be careful out there, will you? And whatever you do, don’t head into Django’s Lot!”

“We’ll be careful,” D replied with a nod. Then he asked, “Sure you won’t come with us?”

“Appreciate the offer, but traveling solo suits my style. I’ll see you again, fate be willing.”

Not asking again, D turned his back to Granny.

Where the stone roadway turned, Pikk looked back. The darkness was swallowing up the figure of the old woman.

“Strange old girl, ain’t she? Being an arms dealer at her age!”

“The enemy’s found us. From here on out, best to figure they’re watching us at all times.” Those were Hiki’s words.

D didn’t reply, but he was listening to a low voice issuing from the vicinity of his left hand on a wavelength only he could hear.

“Better watch out for that one. He’s playing innocent, but the way he carries himself, the look in his eye, the way his hands move—they’re all the marks of a

pro fighter. Skinny as he is, it wouldn't be strange if he could fly too. At any rate, seems he tangled with something in the sky over the pass that rainy day."

"You're right," D said in a voice that no else could hear, naturally. Between rocky walls that towered in the moonlight, only the sound of the cyborg horses' iron-shod hooves echoed.

"Don't figure he's part of Gillian's bunch. Just the opposite—probably hired by that snip of a girl's family. You should put him down, and the sooner the better."

"It's no concern of mine," said D. He'd been relieved of his duties.

"So you say, but you know what they say about fellow travelers making the trip or something—if you don't wanna be mixed up in any more of the girl's trouble, you'd best get on a different road real quick."

"Exactly," D replied.

In no time at all they were through the valley and out onto the plains. The wind alone moved dustily across the desolate ground.

"Well, time for another parting," the hoarse voice gaily called back to the other three riders.

"So, kid, where are you headed?" D looked at Pikk, who was on horseback.

"Ain't it obvious?" Pikk replied, puffing out his chest. Not the least bit uncertain, he continued, "I'm going with her. After all, the pay's real good."

And having said that, the feigned cheer that colored his expression changed. For the boy had seen the smile that skimmed across D's lips. A warmth filled the boy's chest.

"Happy trails to you," the hoarse voice told him, and the figure in black turned his steed to the right and galloped off in the moonlight.

After watching the horse and rider instantly disappear into the darkness, Pikk spat, "Not the most personable guy ever."

"Feeling lonesome?" Hiki inquired mockingly.

"Who, me? I'm glad he's gone!"

Even though Pikk glared at him, Hiki didn't hide his sneer as he said, "Well, we

should head out now, too. Relax. We'll be in the village of Krishken in no time."

His tone was swimming in a self-confidence both the boy and Annette found dubious.

II

A full day later, many different colors of lamps rocked in time to mirthful voices in the depths of the night. The music of a fairly accomplished band was overlaid with the singing of rustic men and women. This was Lawless Years, an entertainment district out in the wilderness.

Even on the Frontier, densely populated areas were favored as more comfortable environs—the exception being towns that were constructed in "mobile locations," as the pieces of movable property were known. But out in the wasteland where not so much as a tree or blade of grass grew, the eyes of many far-ranging travelers would pop at suddenly spotting an entertainment district there, strung with endless lights and bathed in music.

Just as oases existed in the desert, out in the wilderness people gathered in search of water, oil, and tonics. In the case of Lawless Years, they'd discovered springs containing countless minerals and a "rejuvenating substance" that defied analysis, then spent the next three centuries or so delivering their spring water not only around the Frontier but to the Capital itself in a huge mobile factory, all the while singing the praises of the prosperity to be found out in the deadly, wind-churned wasteland.

True to its name, there was no law there. Though there was a sheriff, he was strictly a figurehead in charge of cleaning up the corpses. That night, trouble in the saloons had already seen three dead and seven more hospitalized. Those responsible, of course, were back gambling without a care in the world, while no one knew the identity of the three slain.

The altercation had taken place at a cathouse on the town's main thoroughfare. A hooker who was a favorite of the employees of the waterworks was being monopolized by a group of prospectors from a nearby mine, and the disagreement about whether or not they would turn her over brought out the blades. True to form, the sheriff and his deputies only arrived on the scene after

the fight was over. The dead and injured were carried out, the blood was wiped up off the floor, and, as always, that should've been the end of it.

And then a certain man came. With the smell of blood and a sense of slaughter still heavy in the air, he stood in the foyer and demanded they bring out their prettiest girl. Judging from his enormous size, the way his eyes and mouth were nearly buried in the flesh of his face, his manner, and his tone, the madam figured he was no ordinary drifter and tried to satisfy him with the most presentable of her unoccupied girls. When the girl came out, the man sent her flying. The bouncers raced in only to have both arms dislocated in a flash, at which point the man repeated his demand for their top girl, this time by name.

From amid the women and customers watching the situation as if to say *Again?* one girl stepped to the fore. This was the girl the man had requested.

She told the panicked madam, "I'm sick of the same old customers every time. I want *this one*."

In a voice like the winter wind blustering from a cavern the giant said, "Sure do speak your mind, don't you? I've heard stories about you, and always wanted to look you up. I'm on a job at the moment, but figured I'd blow off a little steam."

"A pleasure," the girl replied, looking up at the customer with no small amount of seductive power in her eyes.

The customer was nearly six and a half feet tall, and seemed almost as wide. A number of what looked to be weights hung from the belt of his long robe, seemingly odd accessories.

That night, the cathouse was apparently a magnet for trouble. As the pair was about to go upstairs, the miners who'd prevailed in the earlier brawl surrounded them. They had been the girl's customers that night. As the men suggested they take it out back, their eyes were already bloodshot.

The customer was going to step out alone, but the girl said, "Okay," and clung to his arm. On glimpsing the peaceful expression on the beautiful face beneath her heavy makeup, anyone would've become obsessed with a certain notion.

Though the madam screamed and shouted, it did nothing to change the situation, and the pair and ten thugs started to leave the establishment.

Suddenly the giant halted and asked, “Missy, you wanna see this cathouse knocked flat?”

The girl smiled thinly. “Sure. That’d be great.”

Her smile froze when she saw the giant’s grinning face. He couldn’t be serious.

“My name’s Quake Resden. Remember it.”

And saying that, the giant looked around at the miners. The moonlight gave a vicious gleam to the steel blades. Longswords, scythes, machetes, and javelins—their weapons certainly had variety to them.

“Hop on my back,” Resden told the girl, raising his right leg up by his side. It was unclear if any of the spectators realized this was the sort of leg stomp a sumo wrestler performed.

“Here we go!”

The instant he brought his foot down, the ground thudded noisily. Astonishment spread across the faces of all but Resden. The lamps and electric lights adorning the building’s eaves swayed back and forth.

“I might be big, but I was born with awful balance, you see,” Resden said with a grin. Though his mouth and eyes were hidden by plump wads of flesh, it was obvious that he was smiling. He touched his hands to the weights around his waist. “To stand up or walk straight, I’ve needed these since I was a kid. Now, all told, they’re a ton.”

The girl on his back bugged her eyes. Not only the miners, but even the spectators went pale.

“Way back in the day, they were lighter, but I got used to them, and as I was going about my business something strange happened. This!”

His other foot rose. When it came down, this time the earth most definitely shook. The girl on his back let out a shriek, and people reeled regardless of where they were in town.

“Okay, come at me—you hole-digging dipshits!”

The roughest of the miners rose to his bait. His weapon was a great scythe. Gore from the waterworks employee he’d stabbed to death still clung to it.

Raising it high, the miner charged forward, but suddenly the ground before him opened its maw. Resden had planted his right foot—and the crack had raced from beneath the sole of his shoe.

“Ouf!”

Sunk waist deep, the miner planted his hands on either side of the split and tried to pull himself back out.

Resden raised one leg.

“Don’t do it!”

To the accompaniment of the miners’ cries the crack closed. The miner’s upper body toppled backward to face the sky, fresh blood gushing from his nose and mouth.

“Bad news, we’ve had a casualty. And when that happens, the aftershocks continue for a while.”

Resden gave them a smile with those indiscernible eyes and lips, and his words must’ve had a disturbing ring to them, because the rest of the miners then screamed and turned their backs to him. Before they’d gone three paces the madly shaking ground threw the men like a bucking horse, and the deadly mouths that snarled open swallowed them. Desperately reaching out for life, several of the men’s hands were left sticking from the cracks when they brutally closed. People frozen in shock from witnessing these horrible deaths couldn’t help feeling like they were bound to the victims by invisible chains.

Once again the giant did a sumo foot stomp, and a fierce tremor assailed the town. Buildings crumbled like papier-mâché. The first to go was the cathouse. The customers and girls inside were ruthlessly dispatched by the crushing weight of the beams and roof.

The only one able to frame her thoughts was the girl on Resden’s back.

“Stop it! Stop it!”

“What are you crying about?” asked the man. “I squashed the place you hated, and the madam. Now let’s go somewhere and have ourselves some fun.”

“How on earth could I do that? Quit it already. Are you out to ruin the town?

Oh, even the factories—”

“Yeah, if you’re gonna do something, you’ve gotta go whole hog, I figure.”

For him, this destruction might merely have been an opportunity to display his power, because he continued striking his limbs against the ground, and in less than two minutes Lawless Years’ three centuries of history were reduced to rubble.

“What do you say? Feels good, right?” Resden said boastfully, while on his back the girl sobbed. “Okay, let’s go. We’ll have our fun in the nearby woods.”

The giant turned around and headed for the one safe spot—the hitching post where he’d tethered his cyborg horse.

Five minutes at a gallop and they were close to the woods. Leaving the road, Resden rode in on the cyborg horse.

“You know, it’s not that I mind camping, but isn’t this dangerous?” the girl inquired, being well aware of how terrible a forest could be by night. Lands of trees and vines where maneating plants were commonplace and supernatural beasts and monsters roamed, they were ominous places where humans feared to tread.

“Actually, it does run contrary to my nature. See, it really reduces the effectiveness of my power. But if I’m gonna have some fun with you, I think doing it on a bed of grass would be better. I may not look it, but I’m real big on chivalry.”

“Thanks,” the girl said, shrugging her shoulders.

To be sure, it was thanks to this man that she’d escaped that hellish cathouse. She’d witnessed his terrible power with her own eyes. However, now that she was free, she found the man’s ultra-violent actions and the fact that his conscience allowed him to commit them so impassively a disturbing thought. In short, he was now a hindrance.

Soon after entering the woods Resden found a clearing and dismounted. The girl followed his lead.

“I’m cold,” she said, pulling closed the front of the coat Resden had loaned

her. Perhaps that bit about him being chivalrous was actually on the mark. But in this case, the coldness she felt was due to nervousness and the atmosphere of the woods.

“I’ll get the portable heater going,” said Resden. “But there’s a better way to get warmed up!”

Fighting back an expression that would’ve read *Ugh, here we go*, the girl quickly donned a smile. At any rate, she was in his debt for getting her out of the loathsome establishment. Also, he’d provide the protection she needed until she reached another town.

The heater he’d set on the ground began to glow red as it generated heat.

“It’s warm, but won’t the stone-flies come if you leave it going?”

Those were monstrous insects as big as your thumb that came flying at insane speeds whenever they saw fire. Just buzzing in would’ve been bother enough, but they would heat themselves to blistering temperatures, then explode. This presented a real problem for people and livestock in the vicinity. A stone-fly’s body was encased in a carapace as hard as stone, pieces of which could cause grave injuries when they scored a solid hit, though that was still better than the not-infrequent cases of instantaneous death.

“It’s okay. You can put your mind at ease.”

And saying that, Resden raised one knee. He’d been sitting cross-legged. The ground must’ve shaken from the same power that’d leveled Lawless Years. No sooner had the girl noticed an irritating buzzing in her ears than something angled down to strike the ground. On seeing the black shape that’d stopped moving soon after impact, she said, “But that—it’s a stone-fly?!”

“Yep. My power doesn’t just work on the ground. It shakes up the air, too. Not a problem for people, but for bugs like stone-flies the shock is like getting hit with a tornado. See how handy I can be?”

“Yeah. But one bug’s not going to do much. Stone-flies form swarms when they attack, don’t they?”

“You really don’t know anything, do you?” Resden chided.

“What’s that crack supposed to mean?!” the woman asked sulkily.

“Stone-flies, you see, are like a kind of hive mind. First, they send out a couple dozen scouts to find a target and see just how dangerous it is. These act as eyes. If any one of them gets smooshed, all the rest know about it. Now, when a person gets one of his eyes poked out, you think he wants to go anywhere near the guy who did it? The stone-flies won’t come near us again.”

The girl let out a relieved breath. “Good,” she said.

The man’s hands took hold of her shoulders.

“What—so soon?”

“Something wrong with that? I happen to be your savior. It’s only natural you give me my reward, right?”

Resden’s lips pressed against the girl’s.

At that moment, the two of them flew apart the way two similarly charged magnets would.

III

As Resden looked over his shoulder his right hand struck the ground. A power invisible to the human eye shot through the earth. It was an instant later that the colossal tree towering before him toppled on its side. By the thick roots that’d ripped free of the ground there were indications that someone had been startled. Still, nothing but darkness took shape, yet Resden grinned.

“Surprised? I don’t know who the hell you are, but anyone who stands in the way of love deserves to be roasted to death by a fire dragon. You can either get out of here without any more trouble, or have every bit of meat stripped from your bones!”

“That sounds intriguing,” a youthful male voice responded. It was so lovely, it made the eyes of both Resden and the girl go wide. “I saw your prowess in that town earlier. You are a Hunter of Nobility, are you not?”

Tension filled every inch of Resden’s body with the urge to fight. In a split second, he knew the true nature of the speaker.

“So, you’re a Noble? One of Grand Duke Xeno’s clan, I take it?”

“I am Xeno Gillian—and the Grand Duke was my father.”

The first response, made after time enough to process these words, was a scream from the woman. Falling flat on her behind, she scrambled madly in an attempt to back away. She was driven to do so out of fear for her very soul.

Catching her crazed activity with his peripheral vision, Resden showed his teeth in a laugh. Then, hugging his arms around himself, he said, “Oh, I’m trembling to the core. Never thought I’d run into such a big fish right from the get-go, you see. And I’m gonna land you for sure!”

He was looking forward. However, all that lay there were darkness and a moonlit stand of trees where quiet was settling once more. Where was the source of the voice—Xeno Gillian? And why was Resden keeping his composure so well?

“Legend has it your parents got destroyed, but you managed to survive, eh? I hear there were some Noble Hunters in the mob that stormed the castle. You didn’t run into any of them? Well, you were one lucky son of a bitch, but here’s where it runs out.”

“You certainly don’t lack confidence, *human*,” came the voice of the Noble. It rang from the heavens. It echoed from the depths of the earth. “But can you see me? Without seeing me, how are you to slay me?”

“Oh, you’re right there,” Resden said with a nod. “I can’t see a damned thing. At least, not with my eyes. But my power—that can see!”

What did he mean by that?

Resden raised his right foot, then brought it down as hard as he could. A dull *whump!* was heard in the woods. At the same time, a massive shock shook heaven and earth. Each and every tree fell at length. Not only that, but when they hit the ground the bark tore off them, their trunks came apart—to be precise, they went to pieces. In the same way, these ultra-intense vibrations would shake flesh from the bone or concrete from steel-reinforcing rods. The split ground swallowed up the fallen trees. Who could’ve imagined cracks in the earth swallowing the whole woods?

From the woods that were breaking into bits that dropped straight down like a demolished building instead of trees, there came a sound like birds' wings flapping, serpentine bodies resembling vines writhed as they fell, and simian figures tried in vain to jump only to find empty air. And in no time the rumbling had departed heaven and earth alike, leaving the moonlight to shine on a massive depression more than a mile wide and Resden, who stood on the brink of it and roared with laughter.

"What do you think? Not even a Noble can defy Mother Nature's wrath. Spending the rest of your eternal life thirty miles underground is part of your Noble privilege!" Resden laughed at the ground at this feet.

The girl slumped weakly. Her face's pallor not entirely due to the moonlight, she looked up at him with terror in her eyes, her mouth hanging open.

"How about that? Did you think I was just an ordinary Noble Hunter? If you were surprised, you can tell me about it later, sweetie."

An electric jolt raced down Resden's spine. The girl wasn't looking at him. At what, then?

Even before he turned to look, he knew.

The silhouetted form of Xeno Gillian stood there casually, and Resden pressed his hand to the Nobleman's shoulder. Gillian's form grew blurry.

"You're a lucky man to get to experience my power up close and personal. Now watch real close as Noble flesh gets stripped from Noble bones."

Resden's last remark was directed toward the girl. The ultra-intense vibrations his hands gave off were especially to be feared. But what should happen at that moment but the Nobleman's blurry arms stretched out toward Resden. His hands latched onto Resden's shoulders. At that instant, Resden's body also became a foggy blur. The intense vibrations that could split the earth were now coursing through him. Flesh fell from his gigantic frame, and the bloody bones too were destroyed in an instant.

Unable to shut her eyes, the girl could only watch it happen. She didn't even have enough presence of mind left to realize it was due to the very same phenomenon Resden had caused.

From a mouth agape like a cavern a single panicked syllable continued to escape. In response to her endless cry, the young Nobleman told the woman softly, “I shan’t kill you. Be at ease. You yet have a role to play. However, that is only after you’ve been made my servant, body and soul.”

His eyes, red and blazing with light, had drained the woman of even her fear.

There are roads even in the wilderness. Roads taken by monsters and demonic beasts. Roads traveled by humans and wagons. And still others—

The transparent white tube disappeared at the horizon. More than a hundred yards in diameter, it ran through towers and a building twice that high.

The building had an area of nearly four square miles. Who would’ve imagined that, despite having enough space to build a city, it was simply a train station? One of the great mysteries of the Noble mind was their nightmarish sense of scale. The lower part of a tower that touched the very heavens contained a two-mile-long home platform. A heavy stillness hung over it, but for the first time in five millennia part of the platform rang with furtive sounds. The sound of hoofbeats.

Astride his cyborg horse, D was bathed in the afternoon light that poured through the roof of the platform’s ceiling.

“They’re strange ones,” the hoarse voice said. “Even though they knew daylight was the death of them, their buildings are bolder in their use of natural light than humans’. It’s almost like—”

“Like they wished to be destroyed?”

D’s words had surely caught his left hand off-guard. The hoarse voice was clearly shaken when it next stammered, “Th-th-th-that’s right. There’s a bunch of evidence that could only be taken as the light-hating people of the night actually loving light. Countless paintings, seemingly purposeless openings in the walls of their mansions, the excessive dedication their scientists showed in their research on ‘daytime,’ the adoration of ‘light’ so often discussed at balls that it finally developed into a whole philosophy . . .”

At the very end, the voice had regained its customary sarcasm and composure.

“That may be.”

The platform was vast. A facility in the land of the dead, with not a human figure anywhere. Light may have filled the emptiness, but it remained light all the same. And through it, the gorgeous darkness known as D rode onward in silence.

“A ‘train’ moving through a tube over a hundred yards in diameter? They sure thought of some crazy stuff. Plus, the only passenger was the unknown Noble who built this place. Must’ve been one real empty trip, eh?”

In addition to the vaguely glum words of the hoarse voice, D could hear another faint sound. Something flat and insect-like glided across the thousand-foot-wide floor of the platform. A cleaning robot.

Although the identity of the Noble who’d created the tube train was still a mystery, various legends about him remained. One was that he was inordinately concerned with cleanliness—with some going so far as to say he had a phobia about dirt. The station, an opulent hotel that would never host any guest save the Nobility, power plants, and more were all sealed off from contact with the air outside, while all the air inside would periodically be replaced. All of these were his own personal property, and the fact no thought had been given to their preservation or use by anyone else after he was gone only served as commentary on the dark nature of the Noble psyche.

“I thought once we were here it’d be a leisurely ride over to the eastern Frontier sectors, but since the Castle ain’t here, there’s not much we can do. Let’s hit the road.”

Not replying to the hoarse voice, D gave a light kick to his steed’s flanks. Cantering down the corridor and galloping up a staircase, D came to an enormous doorway. Turning his horse parallel to it, the Hunter put his hand against the surface of the doors, the sound of a lock unfastening rang out, and the doors began to magically swing to either side. Even after D had slipped through the opening they still didn’t stop. The doors themselves were fifteen feet thick.

A white cylinder alone loomed modestly in air nearly at the freezing point. Thirty feet in height, it was set in a room covering about ten million square feet and with a ceiling more than three hundred feet high, where it looked like a humble artifact.

“The control room,” said the hoarse voice. “Though actually there’s just the one control system computer, and, by the look of things, that handled everything from driving the train to maintaining the station.”

“And still handles them.”

Dismounting, D walked toward the tower. Something like a terribly dangerous intent was focused on every inch of him. The pendant at his chest began to give off a bluish glow. And the device’s ill intents vanished as if they’d been a dream.

On reaching the base of the tower, D placed his left hand against its smooth surface. Though he didn’t hear it, at that very moment something awakened out in the distant wilderness. Energy flowed through a nerve center that’d been dormant for five millennia, spreading throughout its steel body in the blink of an eye. Without a sound, the massive shape resting at the bottom of the tube floated upward.

PATHS HEAVENLY, EARTHLY, AND DEMONIC

chapter 6

I

“Okay, all set,” Hiki said, clapping his hands together. He was sitting cross-legged, with thin fabric reminiscent of a gossamer wing stretched across his knees.

“What the hell is that?” Pikk inquired, sneaking a peek at his work.

“Nothing that concerns the likes of you. Now, go tell the lady I have a present for her.”

“No way. Tell her yourself.”

Just as the boy turned around, he bumped right into Annette, who’d just come over.

Until a few hours ago Hiki had been working on horseback, but then he’d dismounted, saying that soon he’d be done with something really useful and he wanted to just plow right through it. “Why?” the girl had asked with visible distaste as she was about to ride on, and for a moment she donned a sad expression that quickly vanished.

Pikk bared his pearly teeth. “The jerk’s working on something weird. I say we leave ’im and keep on going. Haven’t liked him from the get-go.”

“I think having him around is preferable to being left alone with you.”

“The hell you say! Little girlies don’t know what to look for in a man.”

“What’s that?!”

“Never mind. Let’s just go. You’re being followed, right? We can’t afford to waste time.”

Annette fell silent. Pikk had a point.

“What in the—?”

Pikk turned what could only be described as a look of loathing behind Annette. Here came Hiki, the fabric of his gossamer wing in hand.

“Well? I’ve finished our new transport! Miss, you’ll fly with me on this.”

And saying that, he made a light sweep of the breeze-filled fabric.

“What in heaven’s name is that?” Annette asked, eyeing both the fabric and its owner suspiciously.

“A magic carpet. I’ll have you home in a day. And no foe will be able to lay a hand on us.”

“Really?” The question exploded from Annette, her expression equal parts expectation and suspicion.

“Forget it,” said the boy. “There ain’t no such thing. Besides, just because you’re flying through the sky, that don’t mean you’re safe. The Nobility made all sorts of monstrous birds, and they’re always on the lookout for fresh meat!”

Pikk’s remark made Annette stare at Hiki. Her eyes were heavy with the glint of doubt.

The skinny man nodded. “I’m well aware of that, thank you. Harpies, dead man doves, and death clouds are all creatures of the skies. But I’ve committed to memory the times and places where each such species appears. Avoiding them will be simple enough. Just relax, and leave everything to me.”

“Really? We’ll be okay?”

As Annette leaned forward, the agitated boy said, “I’m telling you, don’t do it. On the ground, there’s a bunch of things we can do if your pursuers come. But in the air, you can’t run or hide!”

“If they catch up to you, you’re finished anyway.”

“I see,” the stern-faced Annette said, giving Hiki a nod. “I’ll go with you. Start the preparations immediately.”

“Hey, hold up there!”

“Hold your tongue. You’re in my employ.”

Somehow managing to restrain his feelings of misery, Pikk showed his teeth.

“Oh, so that’s how it is? I see. Do what you like, then.”

Smirking, Hiki said, “Well, here’s where we part company. You’ll get your wages for today, and then you can go wherever you like.”

“Whaaat?!” A fierce killing lust exploded from every inch of the boy. And it wasn’t on account of his own circumstances.

“Wait just a minute,” said the flustered Annette. “We’re supposed to leave a child alone out here? That’s simply too heartless!”

“Sorry, but this carpet can only carry two. Just a single passenger and one other—the pilot.”

Her expression mournful as she looked at them both by turns, Annette then shut her eyes. When she opened them again, she nodded at the same time. The wishes of one of them had been discarded.

“I see,” Annette began. “Well, be careful out there, little one.”

“Don’t do this,” Pikk said in a low voice. It was the voice of a man who’d been through blood-soaked hell as a child. “Sorry, but if you’re hell-bent on going alone with him, I’ll stop you by force if need be. I gave you my word, so I’ve got a duty to protect you.”

“Which is why I’m saying your contract ends here. If it’s about the money, I’ll give you ten days’ wages.”

“I ain’t talking about the money!”

“This punk really doesn’t know when to call it quits, does he?” Hiki jeered. “So, ten days’ wages aren’t enough for you? Or could it be you’ve fallen in love with __”

The boy impacted on Hiki’s chest like a fireball. With a dull thud Hiki hit the ground and rolled around. Pikk delivered a series of kicks to the man’s side, and on the second one there was the crunch of breaking bone.

“Stop it!” Annette screamed, throwing cold water on the boy’s rage and madness.

When he stopped, Hiki’s hand latched onto the boy’s now motionless ankle.

“Whaaaa—?!”

Pikk’s cry of astonishment rose toward the sky. Fingers reaching out for the ground caught only dust. The boy’s body was effortlessly lifted a good thirty feet. His ankle was gripped by Hiki, and Hiki was rising thanks to the thin fabric in his left hand.

“Ground-crawling rat! Thanks to wonderful me, you get to fall from the sky to your death, for which you should be thankful.”

“Let go of me, you beanpole! Screw you and your stupid tricks!”

“Oh, you mean it’s okay if I let you go?”

His fingers opened.

“Wha—!”

Quickly grabbing him again, Hiki sneered, “Now, unless you want to be smashed flatter than a frog, swear you’ll never interfere with me again. Go on, swear it!”

The boy twisted frantically, saying, “Like I’d ever promise you anything! If *you* don’t set me down on the ground like a little angel, you’re gonna regret it!”

“Oh, your wish is my command! I’ll set you down just as kindly and gently as an uppity little shit like you deserves.”

Now the two of them were at a height of over a hundred and fifty feet. Animosity intertwined in the sky, and insults flew between the two.

“This is your last chance. Swear it!” Hiki shouted, teeth bared.

“Screw you. I ain’t promising you squat!” Pikk repeated, but he then immediately shouted, “Hey—wait a sec!”

“Finally scared, punk? Well—”

“No. Behind the girl—it’s a dust creeper!”

“Don’t make me laugh, you little coward. That line’s as old as—”

“Look, you idiot!”

“I’m not falling for—what the hell?!”

What Hiki saw was an elliptical shape latching onto Annette from behind as she looked up at them. Three pairs of limbs from the dozens wriggling on the creature's abdomen robbed Annette of her freedom, pulling her underground before she could even scream.

"Damn it all!"

The instant the airborne Hiki lost focus, his grip slackened.

"Whaaa—!"

Pikk fell, his scream leaving a long, perpendicular tail.

Just as the boy was about to slam into the ground Hiki came diving down, scooped him up with expert timing, and landed about ten feet from the dust creeper's hole. At the same time Pikk kicked at him, saying, "Saving me was all your idea. I didn't ask you to. Of course, I suppose you want me to help rescue the girl now, don't you?"

"Right you are," Hiki replied, peering down into the blackness of the perfectly round hole.

It was ten feet across. The sides were terribly smooth. While traveling through the earth, the dust creepers actually secreted a fluid that hardened the walls of their tunnels.

"So, it should be easy enough to follow," Hiki said in conclusion to his explanation, tossing his chin in the direction of the hole.

"Of course I'll go," Pikk said, and contrary to what you might expect, he was delighted to finally have an opportunity to prove himself as her bodyguard.

Going over to the cyborg horses, Pikk got the submachine gun and rifle from where they hung on the saddle horn, slinging the former over his shoulder and gripping the latter with both hands.

"Dust creepers aren't so quick to eat people. They like to keep them in storage as a live snack for the next time they hibernate. You might still be in time. Go give 'em hell, okay?"

"Ain't you coming?" Pikk inquired, eyeing the man in an intimidating fashion.

Feigning ignorance, Hiki replied, "The skies are my specialty. A cramped place

like this hole in the ground is a spot suited to rats. Okay, get cracking."

"Hey, you don't have to tell me! But once I've rescued the little lady, I'm gonna take her to her destination alone. This is where you hit the bricks. You okay with that?"

"Sure, I'll even wash your condition down with a whole bottle of Tequila High."

"You're on!"

That settled, there was nothing more to discuss. With all the fight and determination of a ball of fire, the boy threw himself into the hole.

After a ten-foot vertical drop, the tunnel ran parallel to the surface. The boy ran like a man possessed. Dust creepers could weigh more than two hundred pounds. No matter how rough he got, Pikk didn't have to worry about collapsing any tunnel built to support them.

Dust creeper activity was generally focused in a three-mile area around their den.

"Shit, I hope it's less than a mile from here," the boy said to himself.

Suddenly there was nothing but air beneath his feet.

"What the—?!"

Down a nearly forty-five-degree incline the boy slid at frightening speed, with nothing to grab hold of and no place for his feet to find purchase.

Somewhere a shrill noise rang out. As if that had announced the twilight, the lids of the coffins lashed to the cyborg horses' backs opened and three figures came to stand in the moonlight.

"That sound—I recall hearing it somewhere before," said Xeno Gorshin in his fabulous jacket, his aquiline nose testing the air. Apparently this particular Nobleman could differentiate sounds by smell.

"Ah, yes," replied Xeno Braylow. He gripped the hilts of the pair of crossed longswords he wore on his back. Their minor twitching ceased. "It's the Iron Castle. A curious thing. It is said the vehicle was built to travel around the world by some Greater Noble whose name is lost to us. It would seem it yet lives."

“But who would bring such an ancient construct back to life, and toward what end?” murmured the one known as Benelli. With the thin, focused face of a monk he looked out over the wilderness, then shifted his eyes to Braylow. “Gray Soldier and Blue Soldier are rattling, are they not? Were it only one of your swords, that would be another matter, but both? Braylow, what manner of foe is approaching?”

Xeno Braylow’s longswords ceased trembling, but they made a sound like steel weeping.

“Someone to be feared,” he replied.

“As much as D?” Xeno Gorshin asked.

After a short pause, he said, “No,” shaking his youthful yet nihilistic face from side to side.

The other two watched him intently.

“Who, then, is aboard the Iron Castle?”

The question was a frosty murmuring that came from neither of the two.

Having picked up too much speed, the boy felt, *This can’t be good*, and just then there was an opening right in front of him. Sliding across the ground with tremendous force, he was headed toward the center of the open area—but didn’t get that far.

The instant Pikk realized he was out of the tunnel, his body reacted, preparing him for any potential situation. Muscle and bone fought the law of inertia to apply the emergency brakes, turning him hard to the right before he stopped. He’d halted in under three feet.

“Ow . . .”

The boy stifled the scream from muscles about to tear loose and bones close to shattering.

Directly in front of him was a boulder large enough to conceal him, and beyond it spread the dust creepers’ den. Those on the surface referred to it as “hell.”

II

Pikk madly fought to control his breathing. Inhaling as much as he could, he filled his lungs and belly, holding it a short time before slowly letting it out again. The elderly actor from the east who'd taught him how to do that guaranteed that doing it twice would be enough to calm even the most ragged breathing. Once sufficed.

His nose was assaulted by the stench of putrefying flesh mixed with something that smelled like sulphur. Proof that something there ate and excreted.

There was light. It trickled in from somewhere. As demonstrated by the way they went to the surface to capture other creatures, the dust creepers weren't like earth bugs or stone snakes, both of which operated wholly underground. And the dust creepers' sense of sight required light.

About twenty yards ahead, a number of what appeared to be dust creepers were wriggling around. Their size was quite different from the earlier one.

What, kids?

Ice water ran down the boy's spine. That dust creeper had been searching for food for its young. Annette might already be—?

Suddenly a scream rang out. The startled bugs backed away. They'd never heard a human scream before.

Joy flooded Pikk's heart. That was Annette's voice. She was still alive! At the same time, he had to groan.

"You dope, don't make any noise!"

The cries of their prey only stimulated the violent nature of predators.

Looking around to either side, Pikk grabbed a rock that would just fit in his fist.

"There ya go!" he said, throwing it on the other side of the bugs without taking particular aim.

The reaction was unexpected. At the sound of the impact, the bugs turned in unison. To face Pikk.

"Oh shit!"

A stubby one was barreling toward him with terrible speed.

“Haaaaaa!”

Letting out his breath and keenly focusing himself with the same cry, the boy braced the rifle against his shoulder. He had experience with similar sorts of guns. But this time it went quite differently. A kick several times as strong as he expected slammed the butt into his shoulder, and the barrel jumped up. He managed to hold it down to forty-five degrees.

Through the flame and purplish smoke he saw the dust creeper crumple forward. There was a small hole through its elliptical carapace.

“Hoooooly!”

They swarmed toward him. At first he thought there were perhaps five or six dust creepers, but now there were ten, twenty, no, fifty of them!

Pikk made a snap judgment. Discarding the long gun, he grabbed the submachine gun hanging around his neck and squeezed the trigger. He also had experience with this. Vibrations jogged his elbow and there was a pleasing staccato of gunfire as he lightly swept the barrel from side to side. The vanguard fell, those behind them tripped over the fallen and followed suit, at which point the submachine gun riddled them with bullets. And as the last one fell—the gun ran out of ammo.

I did it, the boy thought with relief, and after making sure none of the bugs were still moving, he called out loudly, “It’s me! Are you okay?”

“You? Is that you, Pikk?! I’m so glad you’re here!” Annette said, her tone the complete opposite of its usual.

“Can you make it over here? There’s a way out.”

“I’m on my way.”

Due to the heaped dust creeper corpses, he couldn’t see over to the other side. Still, he could hear her footsteps and sense the girl’s presence.

Finally, he thought. Relief flooded through every inch of him.

At that very moment, a sharp cry escaped the girl. And Pikk knew the cause.

From beyond the remains, an enormous arthropod riddled with holes and streaming greenish ichor leapt up to menace Pikk. But even as the boy slipped

into despair, he didn't give up. His every move was out of reflex. When one of the legs in the foremost pair touched him, his fingers became steel and power coursed through his body.

The dust creeper's movements carried it in a corkscrew around the boy's body, and when it reached the top the bug was released. That nearly-ten-foot-long body being thrown thirty feet was quite a sight to see. The instant it hit the ground there was the sound of eggshells shattering. Worse than that were the grating squeals of agony that made the boy grimace as he shouted, "Little lady, where are you?"

From behind the remains of the creeper young he heard a helpless-sounding voice.

"Come on!" he shouted.

"But, I don't want to . . . These bodies are covered in blood . . . It's disgusting!"

"Damn, this girl's a lot of trouble!"

Pikk went over to the mound of corpses. Regardless of the fact that some of them were still twitching, he kicked them aside, rolled them away, and finally saw Annette standing there stock-still. Just as Pikk spotted the girl, her legs buckled under her, making her sit, but the boy raced over and pulled her up again.

Suddenly Annette shuddered and escaped the boy's grip.

"What's your problem?"

"Don't touch me. You're filthy!"

"Huh?"

On closer inspection, Pikk saw that he was covered from head to toe with sweat, dirt, and gore from the dust creepers. Apparently their blood had splattered all over him as he laid waste to them with the submachine gun.

"Don't get hung up on a little thing like that. I can't help that I'm filthy. After all, I came down into a dust creeper den to rescue you!"

Thoroughly perplexed eyes fixed on Pikk. She was still terrified.

“Okay, seeing as how you almost ended up a meal, I suppose it’s understandable.”

“Don’t call me a meal!” Annette said, doubling over and starting to cry.

Looking up toward the heavens, Pikk said, “At any rate, if we don’t get out of here fast, there’s no saying another dust creeper won’t come by. Okay, on your feet now. Come on.”

No matter what encouragement he offered, Annette only sobbed. The shock had been so great it’d ruined her mental equilibrium.

Ordinarily, he’d have knocked her unconscious and carried her out. But for some reason Pikk couldn’t bring himself to do it. Looking down at the weeping girl with her lost expression, he found himself also standing there like a stone.

It wasn’t through any effort of theirs that the situation changed. From the depths of the den, more high-pitched screeches were heard.

“Oh yeah—dust creeper dens aren’t always alone,” Pikk remarked, horror chilling his blood as he recalled the particulars. “Old Man Hammond used to say that sometimes they were connected to the dens of other dust creepers. And the others have come back!”

Suddenly Annette shot up like she was spring loaded, saying, “Let’s get out of here—they’re coming!”

“Hurry up and go. We’ll take the tunnel back!”

After shouting that, Pikk let out a despairing groan. There was no way Annette would be able to crawl up that slope. Nevertheless, there was only one thing he could say.

“There’s a hole over there. Go!”

Annette started running. She trampled her way across the bug remains without any qualms. She didn’t even look back for Pikk.

“That figures,” he said with a wry smile. “I’ll do what I can. The rest is down to luck.”

He started to reach for the trigger of the submachine gun, and then remembered it was out of ammo. The other clips—he’d forgotten to bring them!

There hadn't been anything on his mind except saving Annette.

"Shit!" Pikk spat, tossing away the submachine gun and getting a tight grip on the rifle. He didn't know how many shots he had left. All he could do was pray he had more bullets than the number of new dust creepers.

They came. Wriggling to and fro, they crawled along.

Pikk closed his eyes. Though he tried to remember a prayer he'd learned at school, he didn't fare well.

At least let the girl get away!

When they were thirty-five to forty feet away he fired the rifle. Three or four of them pitched forward in rapid succession, but with the next shot the hammer fell with an empty *clack*.

Out of bullets!

The dust creepers were over the corpses and closing on him.

"Son of a bitch!" Pikk snarled, taking a tight grip on the barrel of the rifle. Though the hot steel burned his skin, he didn't even notice. He had to buy Annette enough time to escape. Though he didn't know whether or not she'd get away, he was willing to give his life so she could at least try.

A gray mass filled his field of view. Then suddenly it sank. Another mass had piled on top of it. The instant he realized it was the ceiling, Pikk leapt back.

Though the rumbling of the ground told him it was a cave-in, the swirling clouds of dust kept him from seeing what fell and gauging the extent of the collapse. This was no mere cave-in. A tremendously heavy object had fallen in.

Before the cloud of dust had settled, Pikk heard a man's voice say, "Oh, I didn't know there was a dust creeper den around here. It would appear we'll need quite some time to extricate ourselves from this."

Another man said, "Why, with all the Iron Castle's horsepower, we'll be out in no time. Okay, back in your seat."

"Wait. In addition to the dust creepers, I smell a human," said the first voice.

"Now that you mention it—ah, there's a woman as well. Both young. At least,

judging by the scent of their blood.”

Pikk was frozen from head to toe.

Those guys—they’re Nobles?! But if they can only move by night, we ought to still have enough of a lead on them. When and how did they ever catch up?!

By this point the wild swirls of thick dust had subsided, and through the thinning veil of ochre several figures and an enormous black shape began to come into focus. There was a man with a hooked nose in dazzling finery wholly unsuited to this place, across from him was a figure with long hair wearing a threadbare cape and well-worn robes, and finally there was someone with a pair of crossed swords on his back.

When their hazy shapes began to take clearer form and two gleams the color of blood graced the face of each, it came as no surprise that blood-chilling terror came over Pikk, and he ran for the sloping exit tunnel without a backward glance.

Annette was standing in front of the hole looking utterly lost. Pointing up at it, she cried, “I can’t climb up to the hole!”

“You’ve got to—Nobles are coming.”

Annette fell silent. She was so scared she froze solid.

“Okay, get going!” the boy said, giving her a shove, but still she showed no signs of moving.

Three figures were approaching. The pair was cornered in the most literal sense.

“Oh shit . . .”

As he braced the rifle butt against his shoulder, a rather disturbing laugh crept into his ear. Due to that, Pikk didn’t notice the sound of a silver cylinder rolling over to the Noblemen’s feet.

“Shut your eyes!” said a voice that sounded muffled, so the Nobles wouldn’t hear it.

A split second before Pikk’s eyelids closed completely, a dazzling light burst forth in all directions.

III

“Grab on!” he heard someone say amid the strobing darkness and light.

Eyes still shut, Pikk turned in that direction and said, “That you, jerk?!”

“Well done. Congratulations.”

Hiki stood in front of the hole with Annette clinging to one arm, and as his other arm wrapped around her waist he flashed his teeth in a grin. Though he’d made it look like he was sending Pikk into the hole alone, undoubtedly he’d gone in after and seen all that transpired. And now the thin man’s time had come.

“You just have to stick it out a little longer now and buy us some time to get away. We’re counting on you, kid.”

“To hell with that! Wait, damn you!” Pikk shouted, his eyes now open as he ran.

Just in front of his outstretched hand, Hiki and Annette were sucked right up the hole.

“Wait!”

Jumping for all he was worth, the boy reached out his fingertips and caught hold of some cloth. It was the hem of Annette’s skirt.

“Let go!” Hiki shouted.

“The hell I will! God’s telling you you’ve gotta take me with you. Let’s go!”

“Damn it . . .”

Hiki hesitated, but Annette urging him to hurry up was the last push he needed.

Pikk was tugged toward the hole.

“Yes!” the boy cried out with joy, but a second later that turned to horror. He was no longer moving. It wasn’t that Hiki had stopped. Rather, something had latched onto Pikk’s collar to stop him. One arm—that was all the strength he or it needed to counter the weight of three people and the flying capability of Hiki’s cloth.

“Where do you think you’re going, boy?” asked the first voice he’d heard

through the dust cloud. “I may not be able to see, but I can tell by the scent. There’s a woman nearby. Now, come back here.”

“Who the hell’d listen to a Noble—run for it!”

Pikk let go. Or at least, he tried to release Annette. But his fingers wouldn’t move.

“Your tongue and vocal cords are the only things that work now,” the voice said.

Why did it seem to have a gentle ring to it? It was like the grim reaper being made of candy.

“Never could I have imagined that we would catch our prey in this hole in the ground. This we owe to whomever set that ancient iron fossil into motion. Wherever you are, I, Xeno Gorshin, give you my thanks!”

And as soon as he’d finished saying that, he hauled Pikk back. Not just Pikk, but Annette and Hiki were pulled down as well. With a brief scream Annette belly-flopped to the floor. Her weight was enough for her to pull free of Hiki’s fingers.

“I can’t believe it . . . He pried my fingers loose . . . to save his own skin . . .”

Still lying on her stomach, the girl looked up at the hole in disbelief.

“See? I told you. He’s shown his true colors,” Pikk spat venomously. “Don’t you ever trust him again. But don’t worry. I’ll save you for sure!”

“Such a spirited child.”

Feeling chill breath on the back of his neck, Pikk was silenced. The voice belonged to someone else—and this second speaker sounded terribly grave.

“If you are more concerned for others than for yourself, you have the heart of a man. Perhaps I should make you my servant?”

Terror split Pikk from head to crotch. Even Annette turned to look.

A servant of the Nobility? Am I gonna wind up a vampire, too?!

“No, don’t!” he cried, thrashing violently. Swinging his arms and legs, he even jerked his head around hoping to deliver a head butt. Not a single hair was out of place.

“The girl must be handled in keeping with Lord Gillian’s instructions, but this stripling should be another matter. As the one who caught him, I should receive the privilege of the first taste—there are no objections to that, I take it?”

“Yes, there are.”

“What?”

Pikk felt the Nobleman who’d captured him—Xeno Gorshin—turn in surprise. When the Noble shifted position, Pikk, too, was swung around.

Of the trio, two were facing the same person—staring at the third. It was the young man who wore a pair of swords on his back. Though pale skin was characteristic of the Nobility, this man was far whiter than that. It looked as though not a single drop of blood flowed through him. Perhaps he could be said to be more Noble than any other.

“What is your objection, Braylow?” Xeno Gorshin inquired.

“That child—I want him,” he replied in a voice devoid of inflection. It was even more intimidating than Gorshin’s tone. However, the instant it reached Pikk’s eardrums, the boy felt as if he’d been plunged into a frozen sea.

“This is most unusual. I didn’t think you cared for human blood.”

As Gorshin broke into a grin, the stark white Nobleman replied, “It’s not blood I want. It’s his skill.”

“His skill?” said the last—the Noble who called to mind a monk—as he furrowed his brow.

“The boy’s movements, his footwork—had he not tried to flee through that hole, I doubt you would’ve caught him.”

His remark was addressed to Gorshin.

“What do you propose?”

“Allow me to have some fun. Actually, Gray Soldier and Blue Soldier are begging. *Please let us cut him*, they say.”

“What the hell?!” Pikk shouted. “I ain’t your lousy plaything! Before you cut me—forget that, no way in hell I’ll let you cut me. Before you can, I’m gonna

drive wooden stakes through the hearts of all three of you bastards!”

“Feisty, is he not?” Braylow said, his lips twisting. They formed a smile.

Pikk felt his mind slipping away.

“Were he not, it should hardly be worth the trouble of cutting him down. Gorshin, set him loose.”

“Though that might be nice, it still seems a shame,” said the boy’s captor, hesitating. “Look at him! So young, with all the spirit of a ball of fire. The blood that runs in his veins must be quite hot, too. I think I should slake my thirst after all. I won’t allow you to have your way.”

Pale lips hissed Gorshin’s name. The words that followed carried a will like a colossal block of ice.

“Would you stand in my way?”

“I believe I would.”

“Oh no,” Annette murmured.

“I have no qualms about facing you,” Braylow said, both arms rising straight from his sides.

Gorshin’s expression stiffened. Annette reeled. The unearthly aura that adorned Gorshin had knocked her unconscious. Even Pikk was frozen with fear, all thoughts of escape or expectations at seeing a battle between Noblemen forgotten.

Just then—

“Both of you, stop this.”

The monk, who’d watched in silence up until now, intervened.

“Stay out of this, Benelli,” Braylow said sullenly.

“Let us not forget that one of them escaped. Most likely it’s the bounty hunter Gorshin knocked out of the sky. Even now, he should still be after us.”

“We have the girl,” Braylow said, his finger pointing at Annette where she lay crumpled at Gorshin’s feet. “That flash bomb earlier might well have been a napalm charge. It’s the safety of the girl he has in mind. He can’t do anything to

endanger her.”

“There is the other one!”

At Benelli’s morose tones, Braylow’s killing lust dissipated in an instant. Even Gorshin had stiffened.

“D,” Annette murmured.

“Ah, yes. Where has that fearsome man gone?” Braylow groaned, and mixed with his words was what sounded like sobbing—the crazed cries of his blades.

Three pairs of undead eyes focused on Pikk, then quickly shifted to Annette.

“Where is he?” Gorshin inquired.

Annette’s eyes were tinged with red. For they reflected the eyes of the Nobleman.

“How the hell should we know?!” Pikk shouted. “The jerk dumped me and the little lady and went off somewhere. We don’t know where he’s gone, and he’s a stranger to us.”

The blazing eyes of the Nobles focused on the boy. Grabbing hold of the boy’s chin, Gorshin lightly turned it up in his direction so he could peer into Pikk’s face.

“Hmm. Even scared, he hasn’t lost the will to resist us. Such a nice face. It would seem he’s not lying.”

“In that case, have we seen the last of that one?” Braylow asked, clear disappointment surfacing on his pale face.

“No,” the monk called Benelli said, shaking an evil countenance ill-suited to such trappings from side to side. “He’ll come. Or we’ll go to him—but I assure you we shall meet. And my instincts are telling me it’ll be quite soon.”

And then the three Noblemen performed a strange action. They turned in unison to look at the fallen object from which they’d appeared. The sense of evil emanating from it paralyzed Pikk and Annette. Within the vehicle was someone hostile toward these fiends. A certain name flashed through the minds of the two humans.

“Wrong,” Gorshin murmured as if he’d read their minds. “As I said before, it’s

not him. In some respects, it's someone far more fearsome."

And who's that? Pikk wanted to ask. It had to be D they were talking about when they said "him." But someone or something even scarier was inside the vehicle. And despite the fact that they clearly considered it their foe, these Noblemen still wanted to get onboard with it?

"Gorshin, relent on the issue of the child," Benelli said, turning his deeply creased face toward his compatriot.

"Why?"

Not replying, Benelli looked at the other Nobleman and said, "And in return, you mustn't touch him either, Braylow."

"Why not?"

"He shall serve as a decoy. Bait to lure out the one in the Castle."

Pikk's blood froze. Bait? What kind of bait? Fireball though he was, even the boy couldn't fathom their meaning.

Gorshin protested. "Just a mouthful?"

"Are you yet half asleep? Would you meddle with another's servant?"

Gorshin fell silent.

Even Pikk could recall hearing about this before. Nobles wouldn't put their fangs into a human another Noble fed upon.

"If you desire this child, first dispose of the one who lurks within when he appears from his unknown location. Only then may you leave your kiss on the boy's throat. For the time being, hands off. What say you, Braylow?"

The pale Noble nodded.

"That's two against one, Gorshin."

"Do as you like, then," the third Nobleman conceded. "However, we must act swiftly! This girl—she's not to be harmed in the slightest before she's handed over to our lord Gillian, but the one inside won't honor that wish. He's certain to target her."

"This plan is to guard against that."

Approaching Pikk, the monk stroked his head softly. Though his touch seemed nothing but gentle, the boy felt his consciousness start to slip away.

“Now, let us return. On with our dangerous journey in the Castle.”

At Benelli’s words, all three of them looked at the vehicle. No one moved. And the very thought of encountering whatever rooted their feet to the ground turned Pikk’s soul to ice.

THE GRIM REAPER EXPRESS

chapter 7

I

As Xeno Gorshin and Benelli headed toward the Iron Castle's control room, waves of anxiety far from befitting their ageless and immortal clan crashed in their hearts.

The circumstances under which they'd first boarded had been shrouded in a truly bizarre air. As they hastened down the road, a lone man had suddenly appeared to them out of the darkness. Wearing a rounded hat with a visor in front, a formal coat with iron buttons, a bow tie, and with a black ticket holder hung around his neck—he was the conductor of the Iron Castle they'd heard about. While bombarded with looks of suspicion and ill will, the man didn't seem the least bit intimidated, pointing to the rear and then telling them through gestures to wait there before he once again vanished into the darkness. The reason the three Noblemen could only watch him go without further investigating the situation was because from the time the conductor appeared until the time he left they'd been subjected to an unearthly aura the likes of which they'd never experienced.

At that point, from the direction the conductor had vanished there was the faint yet solemn growl of machinery drawing nearer like an unsettling rumble of thunder. Pushing away the night air and darkness that held sway in this world, something outrageously large stopped right beside them about three minutes later. It was as tall as a five-story building and had light pouring from countless windows. From the white vapor it ceaselessly discharged they could tell it was steam-powered, though they could only assume the energy to produce that steam came not from the typical turbine but from some extra-dimensional fuel source.

One of its iron doors opened, and an iron platform slid out by their feet.

"What shall we do?"

“It may be a trap.”

“But if we refuse the invitation, we might be attacked. Moreover, it would shame us to have the one within the Castle thinking us afraid.”

Benelli, who’d been the one to ask what they should do, said, “Hmm, this may be the key to the mysteries of this unknown Greater Noble. A chance to learn the now-forgotten knowledge of the ancients, to see the fruit that knowledge might bear—I’m going!”

And with that he stepped forward.

“Sooner or later, I shall spot D and his lot from the skies. I, too, shall go. What say you, Braylow?”

Naturally it was Gorshin who asked this.

The young fiend of the dual blades turned to the Iron Castle with the face and gaze of a corpse, giving a nod.

Once they were onboard along with all their horses and coffins, the Iron Castle soon set off. The train’s departure was so rough it hardly seemed the work of the Nobility’s engineering, yet that only served to endear it to the three Noblemen. The conductor from earlier appeared with other shadowy men in similar uniforms, and once they’d taken custody of the horses and coffins, the trio was escorted to a sumptuous room. Not so much as a speck of dust lay in the corridors leading there, and the place was so clean it seemed this had to be its very first day of service.

“Why has the Iron Castle returned after slumbering for millennia?” Xeno Gorshin inquired, head tilted to one side.

“I certainly have my concerns,” Benelli said, extending one finger. “Why is it operating again?” Extending a second, he continued, “Why did it let us onboard?” A third finger extended. “And where is it supposed to be going?”

“As for the second one, that I know,” said a gloomy voice. It was that of Xeno Braylow.

The other two looked surprised. He was a man not given to such thoughts. Swordsmen and warriors in general were not concerned with worldly affairs, but

this young man in particular banished them from his thoughts—so single-minded was Braylow that as long as he had an opponent to cross swords with today, he wouldn't mind if the whole world were ending tomorrow. Yet he had offered something.

"Listen," he said.

As soon as the word was out, Gorshin and Benelli heard a familiar sound. Gray Soldier and Blue Soldier were rattling in their scabbards. The two magic swords clanging together could mean only one thing—that a foe worthy of being cut down was close at hand.

"Well, fancy that," Gorshin groaned.

"Interesting," Benelli said, his hand reaching around for the great scythe on his back. "Where is he, Braylow?"

The young swordsman's eyes were only half open to begin with, but he shut them and mastered his breathing. The other two even slowed their breathing in unison.

In that manner five seconds passed . . . Then ten . . .

"He's coming," Braylow murmured.

No other sound could be heard. The room was completely soundproof. Still, the young Nobleman heard someone's approaching footsteps or breathing, or could somehow detect his presence.

They didn't ask where he was. Both Gorshin and Benelli were staring at Braylow. No matter who the foe out there might be, it would undoubtedly be this young Nobleman who would fire the first volley in this war.

"In the corridor," Braylow said. "Coming down it."

The rattling of the scabbards intensified.

“What’s he coming for?” asked Gorshin.

“It’s obvious,” Benelli said, a single bead of sweat rolling down his cheek. “To drink our blood.”

The eyes of all three began to burn crimson. A Noble seeking the blood of Nobles. The notion was so abnormal, so perverse, it stimulated them on a subconscious level.

Braylow looked up. His eyes became riveted to the door.

The other two trembled. They, too, understood. The enemy was right outside—and they knew how terrible he was.

With a click the golden doorknob turned. Braylow reached for his back with both hands. Benelli drew his great scythe. And then, beyond the smoothly opening door, they saw a figure who could only be described as a giant—and at that very moment the Iron Castle engaged its emergency brakes to the accompaniment of an ear-shattering squeal of iron on iron, and the three Noblemen were sent flying.

However, even after the group had boarded again, the Iron Castle didn’t move an inch, so Gorshin and Benelli headed off in search of the control room. They were “in search of it” because they had no more than a vague notion that it would probably be somewhere toward the front. But nowhere in the Castle were any sort of maps or layouts posted.

“I didn’t think this could be derailed, much less take a plunge like this. The Greater Nobility’s technology wasn’t so great after all.”

But Gorshin countered Benelli’s complaint, saying, “That’s a bit rash, Benelli. I’ve heard that ordinarily, the Iron Castle ran through an enormous magnetic tube. Undoubtedly the tube has been damaged in places over the ages. To wit, when it allowed us to board, it was already running out of the ordinary.”

“But since it did run, there’s no reason to believe another fall would put it out of operation. And then there’s the matter of the presence we sensed.”

“And that is why *two* of us are going—surely he must be the same Greater

Noble who crafted the Iron Castle."

Benelli nodded. "There can be no doubt. But certainly a vehicle of this size would be well stocked with human blood. Why come after us?"

"Why indeed?" Gorshin said, head cocked to one side. "We modern Noblemen have no way of knowing what the Greater Nobles of long ago were thinking. Perhaps not even the Sacred Ancestor could—"

Even before Benelli could give him a look that would tell him to stop, Gorshin held his own tongue.

Regardless of the situation, no matter what reason one might have, it was strictly prohibited for any Noble to slight or slander the Sacred Ancestor in any fashion. Even ten centuries after his disappearance. The Sacred Ancestor reigned over the world's night even now.

Coughing once, Gorshin continued, "Why did the Sacred Ancestor propose living in harmony with the lowly humans? Though it was a splendid idea he had."

He meant that. However, Gorshin also intended to make amends for his initial slight, because if one wasn't mindful of that, misfortune would befall them—this was a notion that had gone beyond mere superstition to become a phenomenon in which many among the Nobility believed.

Up ahead, a gorgeous lounge came into view.

"Ah."

"Oh my."

The eyes of the two Noblemen went wide at the figures passing before them. On a marble floor, men in black formalwear and women in white dresses walked with gliding steps or peered through the windows into the darkness beyond. Glass and gemstones glittered here and there, while the languid strains of classical music stirred a chemical reaction from the stillness of the lounge's air. The shadowy musicians playing translucent instruments were probably modeled after those of antiquity.

They were illusions. Even realizing they were phantoms projected by the Iron Castle, the two Noblemen still couldn't take their eyes off them for some time.

A couple wearing old-fashioned scarves walked toward the pair, and only after they'd passed through the Noblemen without a sound did the two finally notice the spiral staircase to their right running from floor to ceiling. After climbing it, they found another spacious hall and several corridors that ran off into the depths of the Iron Castle.

"Big is fine, but this is ridiculous," Gorshin murmured after climbing up to the fifth floor.

The interior of the vehicle was more functional here, with more of the doors being iron or steel plate.

Looming before the pair was what could only be the door to the control room.

"Don't let your guard down," said Gorshin.

"Understood," Benelli replied with a nod.

They absolutely couldn't forget the mysterious individual who lurked somewhere in the Iron Castle.

Gorshin opened the door. It wasn't locked. That in itself was unthinkable.

Many gangs of human thieves targeted traveling Nobles. When they did so, they always struck during the daylight hours. The Nobility's vehicles carried astonishingly few armaments. That was on account of confidence in their overwhelming physical superiority to humans. If ensconced in coffins of the nigh-indestructible metal they'd developed during their tribulations with the aliens, their safety was guaranteed until the end of time. In the meantime, humans would have to settle for stealing jewels and items of precious metals—things the Nobility could reproduce ad infinitum. That was best for all involved. A sturdy lock would guard against any stupid savages not content with riches but intent on hijacking the Castle.

The control room of the Iron Castle resembled the helm of a massive ocean liner. There was no one before the curving window that called to mind an enormous screen. Of course, there was no yoke or wheel, or so much as a dial or gauge.

Not at all dubious, Gorshin stood at the middle of the window. Light surrounded him. It took the form of the nonexistent wheel and gauges. This, too,

was an illusion. Like the people who assembled in the lounge, it was a fantasy projected by machinery. However, a slight turn of his head allowed him to survey the phantom console, and after one glance at it he said, “Energy level reads as full. The rails are bent, but if we can get the Iron Castle moving, its auto-repair systems should go into operation. Starting it up!”

“Nothing wrong with the drive or power systems?” Benelli inquired, his deeply creased face twisting sadly. Not that he was sad; his face only looked that way.

“Negative. Here we go!”

Gorshin grabbed a glowing lever and pushed it forward. Lights twinkled in the phantom console. Power systems automatically shut down by the accident had gone back on. The vehicle shuddered irregularly, but in no time that gave way to orderly mechanical action. The Iron Castle had begun to rise.

“Gorshin,” Benelli called out from behind him. Though it was his ordinary tone, his voice seemed a little hard.

When Gorshin turned and looked, his body stiffened for a moment. It wasn’t that he was startled by the gorgeous figure in black who was face to face with Benelli. Rather, he cursed himself for not noticing the presence of the intruder.

“You . . . When did you . . . ?”

On seeing Benelli’s right hand reach for his great scythe, Gorshin believed they would triumph. Because live or die, while Benelli did battle with their foe he could make his own preparations for combat.

II

Indications of motion reached Pikk as he waited in a hall.

“We’re on the move.”

Annette looked irritably at the boy, who couldn’t conceal his excitement.

“You don’t have to sound so happy about it. What do you think is going to become of us?”

“Whatever it is, it’ll be better than being eaten by bugs underground, little lady.”

“Stop calling me ‘little lady’!”

“Yes, your majesty,” Pikk replied, his voice rising to a high, snide tone. “For starters, why don’t we try asking that Noble over there some questions? Excuse me, but what did you plan on doing with us?”

There was no answer. After leading the two of them to the first-floor hall, Braylow had put his back to the wall and kept staring at the door before him without moving a muscle.

“What’s this crap?! A Noble acting like he’s a warrior or something!”

On hearing Pikk’s caustic remarks, Annette furrowed her brow.

“When they’re afraid of getting hit from behind,” the boy explained, “human warriors keep their back to a wall and face the window or door, like he’s doing. Only, Nobles don’t do that. They don’t need to, since they’re immortal. But he’s doing it. Which means he’s either an idiot, or he’s an *honest-to-goodness* warrior. My money’s on idiot.”

“He gives me the creeps.”

“Well, we’ll be okay as long as you don’t try nothing funny. I figure they gotta be bringing us back to their leader. Probably get our blood sucked in the end, though.”

“Stop it,” Annette said, quivering with rage. “You’re such a disagreeable brat, I really can’t stand it. I’ll thank you to stand far enough away that I don’t have to breathe you in.”

“Fine by me.”

Pikk made a light bound of over six feet that left him standing by the window. Looking out the enormous pane of glass, he yawned widely. Pulling back his right hand to cover his mouth, he said, “Getting tired, but I’m hungry too. Say, mister, anywhere to get some grub around here?”

Having said that, Pikk squinted his eyes. A certain sound had reached his ears. There was no need to strain his eyes again. The magic swords of their watchman —Xeno Braylow—had begun clattering together again.

“Hey,” Pikk said, and perhaps sensing something, he kept his voice low.

“Back over to the far wall.”

“What?” he asked because he hadn’t expected the unsettling young Nobleman to reply.

“Back over to the far wall,” Braylow repeated.

“Shut up! I don’t take orders from no Noble!”

Pikk felt a fear he couldn’t properly describe, and in reaction to it his right arm swung into action. The gleam that sliced through the wind as it flew was just about to sink into the base of Braylow’s neck when it vanished. It was a dart that’d been taken from the board hanging between two of the windows, but one wave of Braylow’s arm had deflected it, leaving it embedded in the floor.

However, now Braylow was away from the wall, and he seemed intensely focused, as if the dart hadn’t even existed in the first place.

Almost as if brought forth by the pleasant rocking of the Iron Castle as it raced along, an eerie malevolence now began to fill the hall, and the gap between the supposedly locked door and its frame slowly widened.

As soon as the tall figure in black came in, Pikk felt his consciousness slip away.

Something cold was placed on the boy’s brow, coolness spread throughout his body, and right above his head there glowed an exquisite face.

“D?!” Pikk cried, and at the same time tears spilled from him.

The one person they could depend on had returned.

“Strange thing you’re riding in here,” the hoarse voice said meanly, but even that was a joy to hear.

“What are you doing here?” the boy asked.

“Well, we’re the ones who got the train started. And it’s our job to destroy the Greater Noble who’s on it.”

The boy bugged his eyes. After considering what the hoarse voice had said, Pikk accepted it.

“Okay. In that case, you’ve gotta find the little lady. A big guy dressed in black, like you, took her away. And that Noble named Braylow went with ’em.”

“Took her away?”

“Yeah. Even now I can’t believe it.”

Pikk shuddered. His fear and excitement had brewed chills.

“This guy stood a head taller than you. No, maybe even two—I don’t know. He comes in, and right away that gloomy Noble pulls his swords and tries to slice ’im up. The same ones that made all that rattling noise. No one would’ve figured ’em for having any special power or trick to ’em. Well, in less than two seconds both pigstickers have been batted outta his hands, and the jerk’s been knocked on his ass. Barehanded. He takes the jerk and his swords under one arm like they were light as papier-mâché, and then he comes at us. I jabbed a dart into his arm, but he didn’t even blink. He didn’t even look at the dart or me, like it’d never even happened, but he scooped up the little lady and left. Neither me or her could even say a word. Even though our bodies and tongues were working just fine. So, what the hell was that guy?!”

“He didn’t say anything?”

This question came from D. Though the boy tried not to look at him, he turned red at the mere sound of the Hunter’s voice.

“Nothing. Not a single word. All he did was stroll right in here, knock Braylow flat, and take off with the little lady—that’s it. Almost like it was decided ahead of time that was all he’d do.”

“Hmm,” D’s left hand said as if it’d just thought of something. “I can understand him carrying the girl off. But a Noble too? Could be he knows what you’re here for. You know, we really should’ve found him by day—but no use grumbling about that now.”

D said, “I hear the Noble who built the Iron Castle even drank the blood of his own kind.”

“Not only that, but they say he chucked ’em in the fire after,” the hoarse voice added, and there was a certain buoyancy to its tone. “But this time, we’d best figure he’s got another aim. Mainly, putting the blood of a Greater Noble into the veins of the Nobles he drains. They’d come back with a hundred times the strength of the one that got turned to ashes in the control room earlier. And all

just to destroy you. Looks like we won't be getting any sleep the next couple of days."

Pikk alone trembled at the left hand's snide remark, while D's face was as gorgeous and expressionless as ever when he said, "So, four of them all told?" The way he said, it sounded like it really didn't matter.

The hoarse voice said, "Records say this train carried its own special guards. No telling how many there might be in total, though. Might be as many as ten thousand."

"Ten thousand?!" Pikk said, showing his teeth.

"Might be a million. Records say he was a pro at manipulating pocket dimensions. No doubt *that's* the reason we couldn't find him during the day."

D spun around and headed for the door.

"Wait. If you're going looking for the little lady, I'm going too," Pikk said, hurriedly heading after D.

"Neither you nor the girly are this guy's concern. If you both survive till he's slain the Greater Noble, just consider that gravy."

"But the little lady's with that Noble. I'll just follow you!"

"You're one brave simpleton," the hoarse voice jeered. If anyone else had been there to hear it, they would've been surprised at the warmth to be felt in its laugh. "First off, we've got to see what's happened to those two."

An hour later, as the left hand looked down at the gory floor of the control room, its hoarse voice asserted, "Not here, it would seem."

Annette felt like she was having an endless nightmare. The whole world was stained with blood. It was a crimson room. There were four men there. They formed an interesting tableau. A man in black far larger than the others had one Nobleman under each arm—the ones who'd identified themselves as Gorshin and Benelli—and in his teeth he held another. Braylow had both eyes wide open, and his look could no longer be described as nihilistic. Bright blood dripped from where the teeth clamped the left nape of his neck, making gigantic blossoms on his upper body.

An odd sound battered Annette's ears.

Slurp, slurp, slurp.

"No . . ." Annette groaned, her hands long since covering her ears. Yet in them the same sound reverberated.

Slurp, slurp, slurp.

It was a sound she'd already heard. Even after Braylow fell to the floor, the sound continued.

The giant had Benelli under his right arm, and after raising him high, he pressed crimson lips to the Nobleman's neck. In that dark, bearded face two eyes burned like coals.

There was a movement down by the giant's feet. Even Annette knew what had happened. The only reason she didn't react appropriately was due to common knowledge. Nobles don't drink the blood of other Nobles. If drained, a Noble would rise no more. Yet why did it appear that Braylow was going to get to his feet again?

With the jerky motions reminiscent of a marionette controlled by just a single string connected who-knows-where, Braylow was just straightening his knees when Benelli's body fell to the floor with a dull thud. His pale face met Annette's gaze. It was a rictus.

Her mind began to flee. For her consciousness, it was but a moment.

When she opened her eyes, she was lying on a bed. It wasn't the room she had just been in. Even the pampered Annette had never seen a bedroom this luxurious. Everything was made of gold and lavishly set with jewels, yet it didn't seem the slightest bit gauche, undoubtedly the work of a genius with sensibilities as fine as cut crystal.

However, even though the room had changed, her terror had not. The figure towering before the bed hid his face with the collar of his cape and a scarf, but from the darkness eyes ablaze with red looked down at Annette.

"You . . . Who . . . who are you?"

A fair amount of time had passed before she managed that question.

Surprisingly enough, there was a reply.

“You can speak, can you?” said a voice every bit as manly and exquisite as that of the Vampire Hunter in black. Moreover, the atmosphere that billowed from the giant was different from that of the youthful Hunter, heavy with stagnant death and the stink of blood. And yet, somehow it seemed pure compared to the other Nobility. While she’d witnessed his terrible feeding on the other three Noblemen, Annette felt that her terror wasn’t connected to her own death.

“You are riding in a moving castle of my creation. As you boarded without permission, I am free to deal with you as I wish. As I did with those three pups.”

“P-pups? Those Nobles . . .”

To Annette, Braylow and the others were Nobles and rightly the object of fear. One glare from them was enough to make her blood run cold. Yet this giant nonchalantly dismissed them as pups. The gruesome sight of him drinking their blood had been proof of that.

Annette felt like no more than an insect led out before a wild beast. It was a wonder that she could even speak.

“What . . . do you intend to do . . . with me?”

“Stay here for the time being. I forbid you to leave.”

“You’re . . . you’re not going to drink my blood?” she said, a gentle relief spreading through her chest.

“At present I am sated.”

That relief turned to ice.

“My sleep was to continue for all eternity in this castle. Someone has prevented that. And it wasn’t those pups!”

There was a pregnant pause from Annette.

“You know who it is, do you not? The other—the one who has such power, such an aura it makes even my heart beat faster. How sweet his blood must be. When you think of it, he is a most unfortunate man. For he has awakened me only to become my prey.” And then the giant said, “What’s this? You’re crying? No, the gleam in your eye is not that of grief. Are you happy? Ah, it is as I

thought. He is that great of a man, is he? Great enough that one who has known me still embraces hope."

Annette wiped away her tears. The giant was correct on all counts.

"You're right. He's here. On this train. It's okay now. I—I'm not afraid of anything!"

"That is good," said the giant, and his tone had no trace of mockery. "Until this matter is settled, you should enjoy the journey. There's no telling how long it will last."

And then his form appeared to waver for an instant before he stepped out the bedroom door. The door closed without a sound, and for a while Annette didn't move, then she very carefully stepped to the floor.

She was still fully dressed. Taking her shoes from the floor and putting them on, she turned her attention to all sides, then quickly dashed to the door. When she grabbed the golden handle and pushed, the door immediately opened.

"Eeeek?!" she cried, her shriek sailing forward, then bouncing right back.

The area beyond the door was filled with shadowy figures beyond number. They were men in gray capes. On their hips or backs they wore longswords, while some also held firearms or weapons that looked to be heat rays.

It was neither their bizarre air nor their terrible weapons that caused Annette to recoil. All of them wore black masks over their heads. In the vicinity of their eyes, they burned with crimson. Those were the eyes of a Noble. They pierced the girl with all the keenness of a blade. Annette felt as if she'd die.

"Pardon me."

That steady voice slipped into the girl's ears, freeing her body from the grip of ice.

Pushing her way through the men was a woman so beautiful it caused Annette's cheeks to instantly flush. Clad in a deep purple dress that obscured none of her sensual lines, her looks were so exquisite even the glittering diamond necklace and golden bracelets she wore couldn't begin to compare.

"Greetings. I am Countess Genevieve. Grand Duke Drago has requested I serve

as your guardian.”

The words dripped seductively from the woman’s crimson lips as she made a light bow in greeting.

So, the giant’s called Grand Duke Drago, Annette thought dimly.

“It’s a pleasure to make your acquaintance. May I come in?”

“Ah . . .”

Annette backed away out of reflex, watching as the countess reached back and closed the door behind herself. The countess walked right past Annette and over to a gorgeous cabinet, from which she took a golden liquor bottle and two glasses.

“You needn’t fear me so—I won’t suck your blood.”

The glasses made a melodic sound as she set them down on a small marble table.

It took Annette a few seconds to grasp the meaning of that startling remark.

“What did you just say?”

“I informed you that I don’t drink blood—care for a drink?”

A pale hand extended a glass with fluid grace, and Annette accepted it without a word.

“You say you don’t drink blood—but how? You’re not a Noble . . . ?”

“No, my full name is Genevieve Vasa. And I am a Noble by birth. Do you find a Noble who doesn’t drink blood odd?”

Annette didn’t know what to say.

“If you find it funny, laugh. If you’re sad, cry. The problem with humans is they’re always so boring. Don’t they know there are so many things in this world to be enjoyed?”

The question was posed with puzzlement and not the least bit of malice, but it stirred anger in Annette’s heart.

“What are you talking about? If we’re dour, it’s the fault of you Nobles. By

night you come into our villages and take our people, draining their blood and turning them into your kind, and anyone who opposes you gets their head lopped off on the spot. You cause fires and floods and make the earth split wide—so how are we supposed to remain cheery?!”

“That may be,” the countess said, taking the glass from her lips and shrugging her shoulders. The gesture was so charming, Annette nearly smiled in spite of herself.

An instant later, Annette’s jaw dropped. The countess’s profile had been plastered with a severity that seemed that of someone else entirely. Even her voice had changed.

“That is correct. And that is why we had such hope for them.”

“Hope?”

“Yes. As test subjects.”

“What do you mean by that?” the girl asked, her mouth working of its own accord.

Up until now, Annette had harbored even less interest in the Nobility than the average person. She’d had no reason to care about them. In her home in Krishken mercenaries in her father’s employ had guarded her, so she couldn’t recall ever feeling the fear of the Nobility experienced by other villagers, and after graduating from the village junior high school at the age of thirteen she’d immediately been enrolled in a boarding school in the Capital for high school.

In the Capital the threat of the Nobility was so slight it made the fear others had felt in the village of Krishken seem no more than a dream. Though there were those at school who showed a sincere interest in the lives and history of the Nobility and chose the scholarly path, Annette had decided from the very start to ignore all that. More than the Nobility, it was country life that she wanted to distance herself from. So long as she lived in this world, the shadow of the Nobility would menace her whether she liked it or not. Sooner or later she would run headlong into her destiny, but while she was in the Capital she wanted to maintain as much distance as she could. And for a girl of her sheltered upbringing, that wasn’t at all unusual.

But no sooner had she left the Capital than she was attacked in the rain, narrowly being saved through D's power. In a situation she could never have imagined in her life up until now, she'd fallen victim to successive tricks of fate that'd ultimately seen her captured underground. Now a Noblewoman sat before the girl. The mud walls of her indifference crumbled, and on her face one might catch a glimpse of the interest in the Nobility it had concealed. No, even if one had no eyes to open, the truth would be plain to see. There was no denying that the countess's strange cheerfulness and her admission to not drinking blood had played a part in the girl's change of heart.

"In short, not all Nobles thought only of keeping humanity under our control," Genevieve continued after a sip of wine. Though her tone was lifeless, the way she drank or held the glass in her fingers was the very pinnacle of refinement. Annette actually felt a little embarrassed.

"During our golden age, there was nothing the humans could do to us, yet their resistance never abated. And what it earned was not on the level of the earthquakes and storms you've just mentioned. In locations around the world, hundreds of thousands of humans were executed. Picture, if you will, watching someone you know being ground into minced meat while still alive."

Annette felt slightly dizzy. The only thing that kept her from succumbing to it was the look of disgust on the face of the countess. Did this Noblewoman sympathize with humanity?!

"But then, even the least of human beings know of that, do they not? Yet the fires of rebellion you felt toward us did not die out—why the troubled face? Could it be you knew nothing of this?"

"N-no."

"Yes."

As the Noblewoman nodded without a trace of doubt, Annette had to divert her gaze. She was being fiercely buffeted by a certain emotion. Shame. At present, she heard the voice of the countess only as a distant chiding.

"The Nobility poured millennia of time, knowledge, effort, and power into mastering and eliminating the rebellious urges in your kind. They sought to kill your spirit. It ended in failure. Neither time nor fear was able to change

humanity. Finally, the board of directors of the Noble Mental Research Center in the Capital were forced to make public a certain conclusion." Glancing at Annette, she continued, "You are familiar with it, are you not?"

"No," she said, her voice no more than the buzzing of a mosquito.

The countess made an incredulous expression.

"You don't know it? But you're a human, are you not?"

THE RED HAND OF EVIL

chapter 8

I

Caught in the stare of those glittering eyes, Annette was several times more ashamed than she was scared. *I never had any interest in any of that*, she thought, but she couldn't say the words. "No, I know it," she said, mustering all her strength in an effort to put on a straight face.

The countess nodded.

"That made us reevaluate the human race. You might say we gave them the respect they were due. We thought your kind would need to be exterminated, or gathered up and sent off to some other dimension. Yet you simply would've returned—in time."

In her heart, Annette heaved a sigh. Not the sort prompted by being impressed. The sort that came from disgust. *Are humans really such incredible creatures?* The thought rose through her like bile.

Annette held the human race in complete contempt. When she was a child, the villagers who'd come to her father the mayor with this or that request were so pitiful, so servile. The same was true of the people she'd seen in the Capital. Unable to even understand the system the Nobility had created, they sheepishly made use of what they could—perhaps one millionth of the system's capabilities—but attempted to create nothing of their own. Yet they fervently researched the culture of the Nobility to the point of forsaking all earthly pleasures, putting together such infantile hypotheses even Annette could understand them—and to her it appeared utterly inane.

What was this conclusion the countess spoke of? Interest reared its heavy head, then quickly returned to normal. That was something that'd happened thousands of years in the past. It had no bearing on Annette's daily life.

"Wait here a while. I know not what will happen later, but you're safe for

now.”

Feeling relief seeping into her chest, Annette took a seat on a nearby sofa.

“There was a boy with me,” she said, her lips only able to move due to the relief that filled her heart. “What’ll become of him?”

“This is the first I’ve heard of him. Might he be with the formidable foe who pursues the grand duke? If such is the case, he is in danger.”

“He could get caught in the crossfire?”

“I can’t imagine what manner of battle it shall be, but it would leave him far from safe. I know not whether even we shall be safe.”

“But that’s—” Annette had nothing to finish that with. Like the countess, she couldn’t begin to imagine what shape a battle between that giant and D might take or how it might conclude, and she was afraid to even think about it.

On a diagram spread in midair, a green point of light was on the move. From the exterior and interior views, it was clear that the diagram was schematics for the train.

“This is the control room—or maybe the driver’s seat would be a better name for it,” said the hoarse voice. “But since this gives us a vantage point for the entire layout of the train and tells us the passengers’ movements, there’s no way we could miss him. He’s got plenty of gumption. And he’s headed right this way.”

“How does he know we’re in here?” asked D.

“The train probably told him. This is his kingdom. He’s got more unseen lackeys than you can shake a stick at. But fighting him here’s too dangerous!”

There was no need to mention the presence of the reactor.

D was already making for the door.

“Hold up. I’m going, too!” Pikk said, ready to follow after him.

“Don’t budge from here,” the Hunter told him without ever turning around.

The boy froze in place. Still he spoke, saying, “Why not? I could be useful in helping you rescue the little lady.”

“Instead of trying to be useful,” the hoarse voice began, “you’d be more help

by not getting in our way. Just stay here and behave yourself. Oh, I just know you're gonna tail us no matter what we say. I'll just make you snooze a while."

The left hand reached for his shoulder. Just before it could touch him, the boy used his every muscle to bound toward the door ahead of him.

"Ha! Treat me like I'm dead weight, will you? I'm through asking for help. I'll do as I please. And when you guys get into a jam I ain't gonna help, just remember that!"

The door shut, cutting off part of Pikk's final remark.

"My, but isn't he the spunky little bastard!" said a voice that could only be taken as a wry grin. "Sure must be sweet on that girl. The kid's ready to give his life for her!"

D's lips moved.

The hoarse voice filled with surprise.

"But then, the board of the Noble Mental Research Center said it all. Still, he shouldn't be so determined, so introspective at such a young age. You really can't apply their view to all humans, no sirree. Just like the Nobility's got some that are *okay* and some that are messed up, so it goes with humans too. The squirt's okay, but to be so damned—"

The rest of the hoarse voice's words were also truncated by the door.

D headed straight on an intercept course with the enemy. Naturally, there was no thought of Annette on his mind.

"One million dalas, as agreed."

The bag set on the table shifted slightly. Due to the gold coins that filled it, it looked as soft and lumpy as clay. The owner of that bag sat in a wheelchair flanked by bodyguards, one of whom swallowed hard and said, "That's a hell of a payday. For that much, you could run a whole town on the Frontier for a hundred years."

"On the other hand, make a mistake and that million dalas won't be worth dirt to you," the man in the wheelchair said in a horrible monotone that made the guard wince. "Even someone as famous across the Frontier as D can't take

on Grand Duke Drago and expect to come away unscathed."

"I know that name," D replied.

The secretary who sat at a desk a good distance away punching their conversation into a typewriter pressed her hand to her chest and slumped over the machine. Her expression had dissolved in rapture—for she'd heard D's voice.

"But I'd heard he'd died in the distant past," the Hunter continued.

"A little over five thousand years ago, or so they say," the man—his employer—concurred with a nod.

Though he is described here as a man, that could be determined by his voice alone. The head that emerged from his gorgeously embroidered robe was fully contained by an iron mask. Not only that, but the hands that poked from his sleeves were also sheathed in gleaming silver gauntlets all the way down to the tips of his fingers. From the tremble in his voice, it was clear that his monotone was actually due to restraining the fierce emotion from his voice.

"Indeed, he was destroyed. But what he built still lives somewhere out on the Frontier. The legendary Tube Express, for example. It seems this enormous train, like some sort of huge hotel or perhaps a factory of sorts, races through transparent tubes at nearly the speed of sound. As to why he would construct such a thing, whether purely for sightseeing or for some other purpose—even now views vary, and any conclusions are fog-bound. One theory has it that it was built for conducting outrageous experiments, but that remains unclear."

"What's gone won't be coming back," D said. It was a tone that could permeate rock. "Why dig it up again?"

"A dozen days ago, I gave a traveler lodging at my home. That was the first mistake. At first blush he looked to be a timid man, but at night his true nature suddenly became apparent and he killed my entire family. I asked him then who he was, and he told me he was a human who'd been transformed by Grand Duke Drago. Five thousand years ago he was abducted by the grand duke and used as a guinea pig in certain experiments. As a result, he said his veins flowed with the blood of a Noble who by day might walk in the light of the sun without harm. And when he called on our house, it had been by the sunlit hours of day. Oh, if only I had noticed then. His face was fine as any peach blossom, his eyes

calm. His neck was fully exposed and free of fang marks. But that doesn't absolve me of sin. My children were against letting him stay with us. No doubt a childish instinct or something let them see through him. I'd scolded my children, told them our family had a tradition of showing compassion to strangers, and invited him in. Compassion? Tradition? What had I done?

"He said he wouldn't make me one of them. Told me to put my family to rest. And as he left, he added something. That the Grand Duke Drago who'd made him what he was had sped about the Frontier in a train that resembled a huge castle. Though the train and the tube around it have vanished beneath the sands, they neither rust nor decay. Even now it lies quietly beneath the sand, awaiting the hour of its resurrection. Naturally, its master Grand Duke Drago too is merely in a long slumber, awaiting his own hour of resurrection in a coffin secured somewhere in the train.

"My mission in life is set. D, find where that train rests out on the Frontier and drive a wooden stake through Grand Duke Drago's heart as he slumbers there. And once the grand duke's been destroyed, drive another one right through the center of his ashes. In all eternity I can never make up for my sin, but once you've done this the souls of my three children, my wife, my parents, and a score of our servants will be able to take their place with God at last."

The man in the iron mask trembled violently from head to foot. It was a mad spasm of grief and anger. There could be no doubt it would become lunacy in a matter of seconds.

A black-gloved hand grabbed the bag.

"You'll take the job, then?" the employer's other guard said, the words escaping in a tone of relief.

"I'll contact you periodically," D told him, and then he turned his back to the man.

"I'll go, too," his employer said, his voice following the Hunter. "I'll go with you. Let me drive a stake through Grand Duke Drago's heart. Please, take me with you."

D slipped out the door.

The voice continued to howl madly. “Vengeance for my children. Vengeance for my parents and my wife. Rip the grand duke’s heart out and let me drink its gushing blood.”

Was the iron armor intended to deny his employer his freedom? Beneath that mask, did he gnash the fangs of a Noble?

D closed the door. Suddenly, he was in a vast area.

“Well, if this don’t beat all,” the hoarse voice said sarcastically, though its tone carried some surprise.

Countless gravestones and monuments loomed before D.

“A train with its own graveyard? Maybe we should call this the Afterlife Express? Oh, they’ve got names carved in ’em.”

“They’re all human names,” said D.

“All the folks who died after being used in their experiments? That’s one unexpectedly thoughtful Noble. But what’s the meaning of these flowers?”

Before every grave were flowers that looked freshly picked, and their petals were even covered with water droplets.

“No way that was the grand duke’s doing. Who in blazes, then?”

Of course, from the very start no reply had been expected from D, but sensing something beyond the pale, a face formed in the palm of the left hand. Its tiny eyes took in the vast graveyard—and caught sight of the gigantic figure standing at one end of the car.

“Such a gorgeous man. Your beauty has earned an introduction. I am Grand Duke Drago.”

“D.”

The grand duke’s enormous frame quaked for an instant, but it was unclear whether D caught that or not.

“Oh, such murderous intent. Man who calls himself D, even your killing lust is exquisite. At the moment, I’m trembling. It’s so pure, so unalloyed. But something else makes my chest quake. D, D, D—who named you thus? I know.

No, I know nothing. Your left hand—something inhabits it, does it not? *He* said so. Said that you were his only—something. *He?* Who is *he*?”

The giant spoke without once pausing for breath, and it took several seconds for him to finish. However, it was clear he was in a confused state. What was it that startled this ancient fiend risen from the far reaches of time, and how would D counter him?

II

Who hears the voices of the dead? Screams short of actual words shoot from lungs choked with moldering earth, and the dead awaken from dreams of the great nebula. The hellish pain of being pierced by swordlike cosmic rays becomes their curse on the two who look down at their graves. Though to them it probably sounds like the most beautiful singing in the world.

“Where are we?”

Even to D, that must’ve seemed an odd question.

“What have I done here? Do you know, D?”

“His memory seems confused,” the hoarse voice said with great interest. “Maybe it’s because he slept for almost five thousand years? Or else—”

“He wanted to forget?”

That icy assertion silenced the hoarse voice for a moment. Its next words even sounded mournful.

“Could be.”

D’s right hand went for the longsword on his back. Both the grand duke’s hands sank beneath his cape.

For these two, was battle a dirge for the dead?

Eyes on both sides held a crimson glow. D’s eyes. The grand duke’s eyes.

The dead sang. The prelude to the final battle of Armageddon.

Though they hardly seemed to be more than walking, the time it took the adversaries to meet spoke volumes about the unholy speed with which they’d closed.

An artless-looking swipe of D's blade was stopped by the grand duke's left forearm. At that instant, D learned that the grand duke's arm was as hard as steel.

D's eyes gave off a red glow. From that moment, his blade had a new edge to it. It took the grand duke's left arm off at the elbow and drew a geyser of fresh blood.

The giant backed away, wind churning in his wake, and after him dashed the figure in black. Leaping, the Hunter raised his sword high to strike, its blade giving off a bluish gleam that dropped straight down toward the top of the grand duke's head. A sound of unearthly beauty rang out. The blade in D's right hand had rebounded mightily, and the top half of it was now missing.

A golden wind mowed through the Hunter's chest. It was D that spouted bright blood. There was a gleam from the grand duke's right hand. In it he gripped a strange blade. Looking to be three times as wide as an ordinary sword, his blade had beads of blood from just slicing open D, while its grip was studded with jewels as if in disregard for the comfort of holding it.

D pressed down on his chest, yet he remained standing.

"Behold," the grand duke said to him, raising his blade before his face and turning the flat of it toward D.

Its steely surface seemed to become a mirror, and something came into view in it. The faces of innumerable humans. There were men and women. There were the old, the hale, and the young. And each and every one of them had a chalk-white face etched with boundless hatred as they stared at D.

"Just as I thought," the giant murmured, heedless of the blood dripping from his left elbow. "When *he* bestowed it on me, I refused to accept it. I told him quite plainly I needed no thanks. Yet *he* all but forced it on me before taking his leave. *He?* Who is *he*? I no longer recall. Nor do I remember what I did here!"

The cries of the stunned amnesiac harmonized with some strange voices. Voices of hate. Voices choked from the faces that appeared on the blade.

A most mournful expression skimmed across the grand duke's face.

"Do you understand, D? Do you see the faces on the sword, hear the screams

of those *he* sacrificed in his experiments? They curse their fate, and curse the God that granted it. Though they have died, they cannot pass into the land of the dead. Because they were not given a peaceful death. But it is not God who has taxed them so. Not the fragile God in which the humans place their faith. *He* did it. Ah, they should curse him for all eternity. I saw his experiments with my own eyes!"

The wind groaned. It became an attack by the enormous blade aimed straight at the base of D's neck. The blow was made with one hand. D braced his sword with both hands to parry it.

Garnished with sparks, the Hunter flew into the air. He'd been batted away. Mowing down gravestones, he barely managed to retain his composure and right himself again. And look. Wasn't that a different hue that stained him from head to toe now? From his face and chin, from his gloves and the black mouth of his sleeves streams of vermilion dripped to the ground without a sound, dyeing it red. Blood. From every inch of D—every pore on his body—fresh blood seeped.

"This is a magic sword. *He* called it Blue Blood. That those who died with a decided hate for the Nobility should focus that hatred to seek the blood of their opponent is nature's providence. Or perhaps it would be better to call it a deadly principle?"

The sword drank blood? And D was bleeding? While it was unclear just how much blood he'd suddenly lost, the young man in black dropped to one knee right where he was. Fresh blood streamed down his face and hands, dripping from them.

As the grand duke watched that impassively, a look flitted across his face as if he'd suddenly remembered something, and a split second later it became a startled expression.

"You said your name was D, did you not? *He* also had a—You . . . you couldn't be . . ."

The giant stepped forward, perhaps in the hope that D's death would crush the astonishment he felt.

D barely made it to his feet. However, from the way he didn't even look at the grand duke, it was clear to see that he could neither parry nor dodge a second

blow from the magic sword known as Blue Blood.

The Greater Noble's blade was only six feet away. The grand duke was winding up for a swing when he checked himself. A certain voice had reverberated against his eardrums. A woman's singing. That shouldn't have been enough to halt the giant's attack just when he was focused for such a fateful moment. However, through his eardrums the singing voice resounded not in his brain but *somewhere else*. In his soul.

It was a song bemoaning death. A requiem for the dead. However, death was far from the singer. A song from the mouth of one who didn't know death, to let all know of the endless grief for the dead—who would make such a song, and who could sing it?

"Genevieve," the grand duke murmured as if in fear.

A woman in a black dress stood just a little behind where the grand duke had first appeared. A scarf the same hue as her dress hid the lower half of her face, which was set with eyes as blue as lapis lazuli and swimming in sadness. The white flowers she clutched to her chest were undoubtedly funerary offerings. Though the two of them were battling to the death right before her, the woman didn't seem to pay them any attention at all as she started forward.

Was this really the interior of a train? In a vortex of egregious will to kill, the requiem flowed out plaintively, while the petals of the flowers she carried trembled in an almost imperceptible breeze. Perhaps even the dead would lend an ear.

The woman walked right past the grand duke and began leaving flowers at the nearest grave. Setting aside the old blooms, she placed several new ones there. No doubt she'd been doing this for a very long time.

The grand duke gazed at Blue Blood. The hateful visages were fading away. He returned it to the depths of his cape.

"I have lost the urge to fight—we shall settle this next time, D."

And turning his gigantic back, he walked away, vanishing in no time.

"What keeps the dead from resting is bright red blood," the woman murmured gloomily. But even her murmurs were like song. "It would seem you, too, know

nothing of the soul."

"Are you one of Grand Duke Drago's retainers?" D asked. The bleeding still hadn't stopped. His face was turned toward the ground.

"I am Countess Genevieve. The grand duke and I are chess colleagues. The only reason I'm here is chess. Though it has become an extremely protracted game," the woman said, her words like a song, but her hands never stopped moving and she made no attempt to look in D's direction. "I have a human girl in my charge. Never fear. She is safe for the time being. More to the point, you should flee this train immediately. Three *former* humans are looking for you."

No doubt those were the three young Noblemen who were after Annette.

"They are not as they once were. Now they are Grand Duke Drago's children, baptized in his own blood. By the look of you, you too are far from the norm, but I hardly think you able to fend off their massed attack."

“Where are they?” D inquired.

“Two hundred yards ahead. They’re in the frozen blood locker. I imagine you know what it is they do there. Why not turn tail before they get here?”

The corners of the countess’s eyes rose with her sneer. From the look on her face, she’d already decided he would obviously do that very thing. Even when D got to his feet, her expression didn’t change. On seeing the Hunter walking away, the Noblewoman threw her eyes wide with astonishment. The young man in black was heading in the same direction as the grand duke.

“That’s the wrong way. It shall bring you straight to them.”

“That’s the job, Countess baby.”

The countess’s mouth dropped open due to the unbelievably hoarse voice.

“What—who are you?” she asked in a dumbfounded tone, and, as if drawing something from the blackest depths of her memory she continued, “No . . . It cannot be . . . Your name is D?”

The young man answering to that name was already headed toward where the grand duke had disappeared from view. Even after he disappeared without warning, the countess could only stand there like a statue, unable to follow after him or to return to what she’d originally come to do. When words finally escaped her, they carried an emotion that her heart could not fully restrain even after all these millennia.

“No, you cannot be . . . Your Highness . . . ?”

III

“No one, and I mean no one,” the hoarse voice said unpleasantly, “can stop that bleeding. *You-know-who* made that freaking sword! It’s got power in it way beyond even Grand Duke Drago.”

“A curse?” D asked as he advanced in near silence. His stride was sure. However, the floor behind him was covered with spots of blood—or rather, an endless carpet of it.

“No doubt. From what I’ve seen, even its owner, Grand Duke Drago, can’t keep it under control. But it’s not the power itself that’s the problem. The next time you try and stop it, even you could be in danger. Take one solid hit, and—”

“I might be destroyed?”

The hoarse voice was at a loss.

Something skimmed across D’s lips. It might’ve been a smile.

“Is that what you want?” the hoarse voice inquired. It seemed to be in a horrible state.

D didn’t reply. Saying nothing more, he walked, finally halting before a black door of iron. The particle cannons and electromagnetic barriers meant to deal with intruders had already been destroyed. And D’s ears caught laughter trickling out through the door.

“Two of ’em are in there. Best figure the third can’t be far, either. You’re going in?”

In lieu of a reply, D touched his left hand to the iron door. Sensors checked him, then commanded the automated door system to grant entry. The iron door opened.

An overpowering stench of blood surged out. Not so much as raising an eyebrow, the gorgeous Hunter looked around the blood-fogged room. There were shelves beyond numbering, which were in turn filled with cylinders, and everything was white. The air was crystallized. Sixty degrees below zero—just setting foot in there would be enough to knock a human unconscious, and in five seconds they’d freeze to death.

In a world that was otherwise all white, one corner alone was stained vermilion. Two figures were devouring the contents of the cylinders they held. They were red from the tops of their heads down to the tips of their boots. One of the figures lifted a cylinder high, scattering its contents over his head. Blood. Equipped with a thermostat, the cylinder could return the frozen blood to its normal temperature at the flick of a switch. However, the vermilion droplets flying through the air instantly congealed into white beads that clattered noisily against the floor.

It was Xeno Gorshin who first noticed D. “He’s here!” he shouted, hauling back with the cylinder in his hand. He intended to hurl it at D.

It was too late. D was now right in front of them.

Choking out a short breath, Gorshin slumped forward. The sword blade that pierced him through the solar plexus jutted from his back.

Not bothering to pull the blade free, D swiped it to the right. The left half of his torso split in two, Gorshin collapsed on the spot.

Above D’s head the sound of steel biting steel rang out; he twisted his upper body to knock away the blade of the scythe, and then drove his sword into Benelli’s chest. The deadly thrust was executed with ungodly speed while the Nobleman was off balance, so there was no way he could escape it. Benelli was run right through the heart, his knees buckled feebly, and he fell flat on his back.

“No choice but to catch ’em off-guard,” said the hoarse voice that rose from D’s left hand. “Still, it was disappointingly easy. What do you think?”

D didn’t answer, but gazed at Xeno Gorshin’s corpse. His longsword spun around in his right hand. With a backhanded grip on it, D drove it straight down at Gorshin’s chest.

The tip stopped when it hit the floor.

Gorshin was standing right in front of the blade. He’d gotten up with unbelievable agility. The movements were beyond what Nobles were capable of.

“So, a Noble’s been made a servant of the Nobility?”

The hoarse query was countered by a wry grin from the resurrected Nobleman.

“Such is fate. As a result, *your* fate remains unchanged, D! How do you slay a Noble who can be run through the heart without being destroyed?”

Tilting his head forward a bit, Gorshin spat a vermilion bead into the palm of his hand.

“The blood I just drank has solidified. But now it shall serve a different role.”

Raising his palm to mouth level, he blew on it.

D caught the vermilion bead sailing toward him in his left hand. Or rather, the

tiny mouth that formed on his palm swallowed it. Gorshin grinned just at the moment D's blade carved him open from the left shoulder down to the right lung. D, too, staggered. In part it was due to his massive blood loss. Added to that was another loss of blood—that which the mouth in his left hand had violently vomited up, soaking Gorshin's chest.

"A symbiotic relationship is a double-edged sword, is it not?" Gorshin said, showing his pearly teeth and not even bothering to wipe off the fresh blood. "I am not particularly skilled at combat, so I only engage someone when attacked. However, when necessary, my blood beads are pure poison. The blood coursing through your body is now busily dissolving your innards and your left hand. Here, I shall give you some more."

Vermilion beads appeared in his mouth, and this time he blew them directly at D.

D's blade flashed into action. It was such a dazzling piece of swordplay it made his mortally wounded condition seem a ruse—and every last one of the deadly blood beads was cut in two, spraying the floor.

Gorshin braced himself to leap away from the approaching D. His eyes were drawn to a crimson glow. D's eyes. Ah, even with the blood of Grand Duke Drago in his veins, the young Nobleman froze on the spot.

D's merciless blade flashed out without a sound. Clearly it should've made a horizontal slash right through Gorshin's neck. And he wouldn't have time to spit out another blood bead.

A gleam flashed out. It was going to strike D from behind, but it clashed against the Hunter's blade when he swung it back without so much as turning. Amid blue sparks from steel on steel, Gorshin leapt to the far side of the room while D halted to confront his new foe. In other words, the great scythe-wielding Benelli, also risen from the dead.

"Benelli, take off his left arm," Gorshin shouted. "The blood of the grand duke tells me to do so. Cut him! Cut it off!"

The great scythe whistled an arc through the air. However, Benelli may have had an understandable fear of D's longsword, as he was not quick to close with the Hunter.

“Coward—watch this!”

Gorshin opened his mouth. From it he spat blood beads. Not just one. Ten or twenty of them. The crimson beads left gorgeous streaks of contrast as they flew through the silvery world. D’s gleaming blade swiftly struck down half of them.

At that point the blade of the scythe came at him—dodging it, D reeled, and one of the blood beads cracked open right in front of his face. It must’ve contained a virulent poison, because D began coughing violently. And the blade of the scythe assailed him. He dodged it by about the thickness of sheer fabric, but it was followed by a second swipe—and there was the crunch of severed bone.

After a little triumphant jig Benelli charged forward, only to be stopped by a sudden, violent cough. For he, too, had inhaled the blood bead’s poison. Blood splashed across the floor.

“Damnation!” Benelli exclaimed, reeling.

Gorshin ran over to offer him a shoulder to lean on, saying, “Let us fall back. Even after inhaling my blood beads, he is still our equal. And in your present state, you would be at an even greater disadvantage in battle.”

“What do you—” Benelli began to protest, shaking from head to toe. “One more blow will end it. We can take his head now.”

The last remark came out with a gout of blood.

“It is *your* head that’ll be taken. Look at your scythe. It quakes with your every cough.”

“So—what of it?”

“Look at his blade.”

Looking his compatriot in the face with defiance in his eyes, Benelli then looked at D.

“What in the—?!”

He was stunned. Though D was coughing twice as hard as Benelli, his sword didn’t move an inch.

Clinging to one another, the two Noblemen disappeared into the back of the refrigerated chamber; there was the sound of an automated door closing somewhere, and then a stillness descended.

First he'd faced Grand Duke Drago, and now this pair of Noblemen—what's more, both of the latter had had their powers enhanced by Drago's bite, while D had fought with the wounds the grand duke had dealt him and after inhaling deadly, poisonous gas. The pair had fled. Anyone could see it was a victory for D.

However, D alone knew the true nature of the battle. As he'd fought them yet allowed them to escape, it was a defeat for him. His foes hadn't been reduced in numbers. To the contrary, there was no guarantee Grand Duke Drago wouldn't increase their power even more. No, he was quite certain to do just that. And once he did, would D in his present state be able to stand against them?

Jabbing his sword into the floor, D supported himself and turned his eyes to his left hand. At a glance it was clear what that blow from the scythe had cleaved. His left arm had been taken off at the elbow, leaving a vivid wound in its place.

"What do you intend to do with that thing?" Xeno Gorshin inquired, making no attempt to disguise his ill humor.

"Merely a war trophy—or so I'd like to say, but it bothers me. That hoarse voice always seemed to come from somewhere around his left hand."

Benelli raised what he had in his right hand to eye level.

The two of them were still making their way down a corridor.

His rough fingers gripped a foot-long iron skewer. The skewer ran through a human left hand.

"Also, fragments of the grand duke's memories flow in our blood. Apparently D's left hand gives him power."

"In other words, without *this*, he should be an ordinary dhampir?"

"Yes, probably."

"In that case, we must hurry and finish him off."

"Only after we've shown this to the grand duke. It's a curiosity. Perhaps it will enable us to learn more about D."

As the robed figure and the one in formalwear went down the corridor, a diminutive shadow followed after them.

“Found ’em at last,” Pikk said, and though he wanted to snap his fingers he somehow restrained the urge. “Hold on, little lady. I’ll save you for sure!”

Nothing burned in the boy’s eyes but a fiery dedication toward his rescue mission.

THE DARK STORY OF CREATION

chapter 9

I

The boy's initial impression of the Iron Castle only grew firmer as he trailed after the two Noblemen. This *thing* they were currently riding in absolutely did not seem like a train. Consider the lavish use of gold and jewels, the corridor ceiling and walls adorned with such intricate carvings they conveyed a sense that its builder wouldn't allow any surface to remain mundane, corridors with carpets that had a pile so deep it looked as if you might sink up to your knees in it, the fact that having elegant crystal chandeliers grace the ceilings was the norm, a lobby so vast and opulent it might be mistaken for an actual room, the restaurant.

The concert hall looked to be on the scale of a hundred times the size of a village chapel; musicians the likes of which Pikk had never seen produced music sweeter than any he'd ever heard, flowing out constantly over the uninhabited rows of seats. There were no people anywhere, not even a sense that people had been there, and when passing through halls with cathedral ceilings the boy looked up to the windows set up so high he got the feeling he might've glimpsed some figures there, and when he went through the dancehall he distinctly sensed figures in formalwear and dresses executing the steps of an elegant waltz behind him. Here on this train, the past lived on in silence.

But most startling of all was the length the train boasted. When Pikk, whose legs had earned him a reputation for running like the wind, was finally out of breath, his surroundings abruptly changed. Now there was no trace of the train as dazzling as any hotel. Transparent walls stood to either side of the corridor, and beyond them were innumerable beds and mechanical devices whose purposes Pikk didn't fathom. As white predominated the floors and walls, these were obviously operating rooms. And each and every one of them had been laid to waste with savage force, committing them to the care of the shadow of death.

“What the hell happened on this train?” the boy murmured.

“We shall tell you,” said a voice that rained down on him from above.

Although the pair of Noblemen had been nearly a hundred yards ahead of him scant seconds earlier, they now stood to either side of Pikk, flanking him tightly.

“How nice of you to tail us. Was it treasure you sought, or the girl?” asked the grinning Gorshin, pearly white fangs peeking from between his lips.

“It ain’t like that!” Pikk bellowed, and as he did so he slipped from between them to stand in the center of the corridor.

“Wait!”

Benelli tried to grab him, but Pikk avoided his arms, running straight ahead. In this case, that was toward the rear of the train.

Suddenly, his balance was upset. The floor beneath his feet had disappeared. Undoubtedly this was a trap for intruders. Pikk seemed to fall forever in the pit that’d suddenly opened.

The next thing he knew, blonde hair swayed overhead and lapis blue eyes were looking down at him.

“Awake, are you? Such a brave lad. I am Countess Genevieve.” To the dumbstruck Pikk she continued, “That hole is for dealing with invaders, though it also doubles as a device for accommodating guests. It’s so vast, even adults might find themselves lost down here.”

Pikk sprang up. He already understood the situation.

“Where is she?!”

“Be at ease. She’s in the safest place on the entire train. Are you her little brother?”

“That’s a laugh. Who’d wanna be that prissy’s—”

“Don’t say such things. Be nice,” the Noblewoman said, her sensual red lips making an almost innocent smile.

“So, where is she, then? That’s where I’ve gotta go, too.”

“Will you be nice? If you will, I can take you there. However, in order to see

her, you must first get the grand duke's permission. I wonder, are you brave enough to meet the grand duke?"

"Yeah, of course so!" Pikk said, throwing back his shoulders with bravado. "I don't care who it is, Noble or monster, I don't show my back to nobody. Bring me to him right quick!"

His face, red and puffed with fight and feigned cheer, stiffened at once. The countess had brought her own face closer to his. The beauty of the Nobility had a strange air that made it differ from that of humanity. In addition, there was something regal about this woman that could inspire even the mind of a child.

"You're a spirited boy, are you not? How I wanted to have a son like you. Can you walk?"

"Uh, yeah."

"Then let us be off. It's only five minutes on foot."

Sounds like part of a realtor's spiel, Pikk thought, despite his fear.

When they stepped through the door, Pikk froze solid. Xeno Gorshin and Benelli were standing there. They gazed down at him intently, evil in their eyes, but the boy immediately scowled back at them.

"W-w-what the hell? You bastards want a piece of me?!" he snarled, taking a brawler's stance.

"Calm yourself. The countess here has told us not to do anything to you."

"This time, we're your escort. *This time*."

So, next time we'll throw down, eh? Pikk thought in his heart of hearts.

"What of the 'failures'?" asked the countess.

"At present, a peacekeeping unit is in operation. We should have the results soon," Benelli replied.

Shifting her gaze, the countess said, "You do not look well."

Xeno Gorshin had been looking down at the floor, but he raised his face. His long formal jacket was completely soaked with blood.

"The wound from D's sword still hasn't healed. It won't even stop bleeding."

It was Benelli who offered this explanation. Gorshin looked down at the floor once more.

Feeling a strange presence, Pikk looked up at the countess. Her lovely visage was warped by surprise.

“Impossible . . . The two of you have the grand duke’s blood . . . You are not the Nobles you once were . . . And yet you were dealt a wound that will not close . . . This cannot be.”

“Yet it *is*,” Benelli said, looking askance at Gorshin. “The man known as D is no ordinary Hunter. Let me say this—I feel the same *something* from him that I do from the grand duke.”

Silence rolled by.

A voice like death itself said, “That *something* is ‘power.’”

It was Xeno Gorshin. His face was white as a sheet, yet crimson eyes blazed from it. Burning with anger and hatred—and fright.

“When his blade cut me thusly,” he continued, “I felt something more than just flesh and bone being cleaved. Perhaps I could call it the source of my life. The wound will not close, the bleeding will not cease. If this continues much longer, I will be gone. At present I can barely restrain them, but soon I will be unable to keep my blood beads from running amok.”

The countess had her eyes shut. Immediately opening them, she said, “Let us make haste. It may be that we face *something* incredible.”

The countess had said it was five minutes on foot, and sure enough at the end of the corridor an enormous metal door different from all the others came into view. Completely free of ornamentation, its surface gleamed starkly from the illumination.

“It would seem we have arrived without incident.”

Sensing the genuine relief in the countess’s voice, Pikk was a little surprised. This was a woman who didn’t think those two devilish Noblemen were worth the time of day, a woman who ordered around a gravely wounded Noble—yet something was prowling around here that frightened her?

“Not yet,” Benelli said, his right hand touching the great scythe on his back. “Stay on your guard until we are inside.”

“I know,” the countess replied, yet her elegant stride never faltered as she walked up to the door.

It was then that an almost indescribable sound reached the ears of all of them. It was a human voice. But could any human, or even a Noble, raise such a cry, like agony seared them to the marrow of their bones and their soul was being carved out? It would be better to die than to meet whatever fate prompted such a scream.

Pikk covered his ears. Even the pair of Noblemen turned their cruel faces in all directions, looking around.

“Going in.”

Remaining expressionless, the countess nodded in reply.

Xeno Gorshin pulled the chain next to the door. Without a sound, the door slid to the right. First Gorshin entered, with the countess and Pikk following after. Last was Benelli, who stood lookout in the corridor, and once he joined them the door shut.

Though the agonized voice ceased, Pikk didn’t take his hands off his ears. Something hot spilled from the corners of his eyes, rolling down his cheeks to his jaw.

“Are you crying, little boy?” Benelli sneered. “Taken in by that pitiful, effeminate voice? But then, you are only a human brat after all. A coward to the very pit of your heart.”

A crack resounded from the Nobleman’s jaw. Not his cheek. Benelli reeled backward for two steps before finally righting himself again.

Rubbing the delicate hand that’d delivered an exceptional right hook, the countess said sternly, “I will not have you taunting this child. To protect the girl in the grand duke’s custody, this boy followed the two of you, knowing it might well cost him his life or his soul. I cannot allow such resolve to be belittled. I, Countess Genevieve, forbid you from ever doing so again.”

“Understood,” Benelli immediately capitulated, though his eyes had a malicious gleam. But even that was shaken.

It was that voice again, only now it began to echo through the room.

“There *it* goes again,” Pikk groaned, clamping his hands back over his ears.

“No, it’s not the same,” the countess told him.

“Huh?”

“It would seem everyone has their own worries—let us go.”

At the urging of the countess, the group began to pass through a chamber that looked to be a lobby. On opening the door at its far end, they found another corridor. Unlike the others, this was all gleaming silver. The four of them halted before the door at the end of the corridor. There could be no doubt that this was where the anguished cries originated. As the countess advanced, the door opened naturally.

It was a strange room. Apparently it covered more than seven thousand square feet, yet aside from an assortment of bizarre devices seemingly placed at random there was nothing to be seen but five couches, with a gigantic figure resting on the center one. It was the grand duke. Sitting back against the sofa with eyes closed, he was directly across from a clear glass pane that ran the entire length of the wall.

“What the hell is that?”

Pikk’s query referred to the grand duke—and to what lay beyond the glass.

In the distance there loomed an ancient stone wall, of all things.

The ghastly voice continued even now. Pikk could see with his own two eyes that it came from the grand duke’s throat. Surely this was the cause of the mournful expression the countess wore. But what could cause a Noble among Nobility—a Greater Noble who treated Xeno Gorshin and Benelli like babes—to fall into such a turbulent state even in his sleep?

It’s behind the glass. Unconsciously, Pikk was certain of that. He didn’t know why. Behind the glass. That’s where the cause lay.

Pikk didn’t care in the least about the grand duke’s torment. His thoughts were

dominated by the face of the girl on her way home from the Capital. Yet somehow, he was hopelessly drawn to this. Drawn to whatever lay beyond the glass.

Still covering his ears, Pikk realized he was moving toward the pane. The countess and the two Noblemen were so focused on the grand duke they didn't even glance at the boy. So as not to draw their attention, he let his focus drift—only fifteen feet to go. He made a dash for it. No one intervened.

Pressing right up against the glass, he peered down.

II

The boy fell with a cry from his throat that sounded like he was being strangled, and taking note, the countess flew over to catch him. She bridged the fifteen feet in one effortless bound. Yet her action stirred only the slightest breeze.

"You saw, didn't you, you foolish lad."

The countess gazed down at Pikk lovingly, but his little face was pale and his eyes had rolled back in his head. What's more, he began foaming at the mouth and his body twitched violently. He was most certainly not a cowardly child—to the contrary, at that age he'd already been through more hardship than most adults, and his heart was tough as a dragon's armored hide. That being the case—what was below the pane of glass?

"I shall take him to the examining room," the countess said, looking at the grand duke and heading for the door, but just then the agonized cries that'd filled the room stopped dead. Gorshin and Benelli each took a step back and fell to one knee, while the countess set Pikk down on the floor, bent her left arm in front of her chest, and took her dress in her right hand to curtsey in greeting.

The giant was just getting up from the sofa. His face called to mind stone, and two eyes opened in it like fissures breaking wide. The room was tinged with red. Though this was due to the grand duke's eyes, it was unclear if they gave off that red glow merely because they were bloodshot.

"I was dreaming," he said in a voice like rock scraping rock. "Will *he* give me naught but nightmares for all eternity?" And then his eyes turned not to the countess, not to the two Noblemen, but to Pikk where he lay on the floor. "Has he come in search of the girl?"

His guess was precisely on the mark.

"Let him see her as soon as possible. Now, D—what has become of him?"

"These two fought him and cut off his left arm. However, one of them was gravely injured, and even now the bleeding won't be stemmed."

Looking not at Gorshin or Benelli but at the countess, the grand duke said, "His blade cannot be tamed even after receiving my blood? Yes, it's just as I thought. This has become most interesting. He is certain to come here eventually."

"Before he does, we shall—" Benelli interjected.

The grand duke merely shot him an ill-tempered glance before continuing, "Nightmare or not, this is a vision *he* has given me. It taught me a number of things. Not only of the past, but of the future as well. Though the message is yet shrouded in mist, it would seem this train will not run smoothly."

"Due to D?"

There was no answer.

The countess's eyes turned red, and she asked, "There are other troubles as well, then?"

"Perhaps. At any rate, it would seem there was some merit to being awakened. Both for me, and for you."

An expression that beggared description flitted across the countess's face. One of both pleasure and grief. It was the one she'd found only after millennia of

living.

“That’s—fine,” the countess replied, her voice now changed.

Glaring intently at Xeno Gorshin, the grand duke said, “I shall set him right. Come.”

He beckoned with a nod.

For some reason, Gorshin shook his head. Not only that, but he also backed away as if he were going to flee.

“Damn you for having the heart of a flea. Come.”

The grand duke’s eyes gave off a red glow. It burned itself into Gorshin’s retinas.

The young Nobleman stood stock-still, but coughed as if in one last act of resistance. He spat up blood beads. Benelli groaned and backed away. Their poison was so virulent, it’d rendered D helpless enough for them to lop off his left arm.

“Parlor tricks,” said the grand duke, opening his mouth wide.

An incredible wind resulted. The hair of all save the grand duke billowed in the same direction. The grand duke had inhaled. Every single blood bead was sucked into his maw. No doubt the deadly beads burst in his mouth.

The grand duke’s Adam’s apple bobbed as if he were swallowing something, and then he remarked, “That might be sufficient to kill a field mouse.”

Having said that, he stood before Xeno Gorshin. Grabbing the young Nobleman by the throat, he lifted him effortlessly, and Gorshin could do nothing to stop him. The countess looked down at her feet.

Before long Gorshin was thrown to the floor with a thud, where he twisted weirdly, then quickly got to his feet. Neither his face nor his physique had changed. However, the pained expression was gone, and his bleeding had ceased. All that differed was the pair of teeth marks that remained in two spots on his neck.

Gorshin must’ve felt this full yet incomprehensible recovery, because he twisted his lips into a grin. His expression and the fangs that peeked from the

corners of his mouth were the same as before, yet an entirely different Nobleman stood there.

“I’m cured. And I’ve changed,” he said in a voice that seemed to echo from the depths of the earth, and there was something about it that resembled the grand duke’s tone.

“My apologies for letting you see me in such an unseemly state,” he said, bowing deeply to the grand duke. “Together with Benelli and Braylow, I will see to it that the maggot plaguing this train is eliminated once and for all. We shall set out immediately.”

“No, wait a moment.”

“Why, milord?”

Though the wording was cordial, the tone was one of repressed rage. He was infused with a rebelliousness and savagery inconceivable in the old Gorshin. But one roar from a veritable thunder god swept that away.

“Silence!”

In time with his command the giant’s right arm swept out. With a dull thud Gorshin was sent sailing through the air, his neck bent ninety degrees. However, a split second before he was to slam against the wall, the young Nobleman extended his hand and struck a pose as if sticking to the wall, deftly leaping back and landing on his feet in precisely the same spot he’d been standing.

The grand duke grinned.

“Hold. Whether he wants to fight or not, our foe shall come to us.”

Braylow suddenly halted. There had been a disturbance to the spiraling madness of his essentially aimless wandering. The latest disruption came from a baseless anxiety and a killing lust.

“Rattling,” he muttered almost incomprehensibly. He could hear confirmation of that phrase from his back. Somewhere, *something* was happening that threw his two magic swords into a frenzy.

“So, where am I?”

Braylow squinted his eyes. He hadn’t the slightest idea of his present location.

His unbalanced psyche sought to suppress its madness—and his wandering had been in search of an outlet for his insanity.

“So, where am I?” he repeated, and a glowing green schematic appeared before his pale and slender face at eye level. For *this* Braylow was of the same blood as the train’s owner.

He was at the front of the vehicle.

“Rattling,” the demon swordsman of a Noble murmured. “Where is *he*?”

And then he began to walk like a phantom. In no time he reached the control room. The look he gave the door that impeded further progress was colored with madness.

“Just beyond this, then?”

In a sense, Braylow was correct. When he took a step forward, a warning howled down at him from overhead.

“Present entry card. This is a class one security area. Present entry card. If you cannot present credentials, leave the area. Attack to commence three seconds after this warning concludes. Three . . .”

Braylow’s eyes began to give off a red glow.

“Two . . .”

His right hand reached for his back. The question was, which enchanted blade would he choose, Blue Soldier or Gray Soldier?

“One.”

From anywhere and everywhere countless arrows of light concentrated on Braylow. A heartbeat later, the lights limned new paths, and fire erupted from the ceiling, floor, and walls. See? Dozens of ultra-thermal rays had been stopped by Xeno Braylow’s twin longsword blades. Not only that, but all of them had been deflected back. The fires all around him were like cries from those stricken.

“Impertinence,” Braylow spat, and his right arm plunged forward.

Before there was time to subject him to a second assault, his blade had pierced the door, quickly shredding it like paper and making an opening large

enough for a person to pass through with ease.

“*He* must be up ahead.”

Without hesitation, Braylow’s tall form stooped a bit to slip through the door.

Ah, there was a reactor in the control room. Who could say for certain that his madness wouldn’t be unleashed on it in a gale of sword blades? And more importantly, who did the Nobleman mean when he said “he” was in the control room?

III

Annette was lying in bed when the door opened without so much as a knock. Since anxiety denied the girl sleep, her blood ran cold the instant she glimpsed the enormous figure filling the doorway. Before she could even ask what he was doing, the giant had glided over to the bed. Though his body looked as if it must weigh a ton, not so much as a single footstep was heard. Annette was scooped into his arms as if she were light as a feather. Those arms felt more like stone than steel, as did his chest. She could barely move her head, but that was all she could do.

Annette’s eyes shifted their focus from the giant’s chest to his face. He was looking down at her. In that dark face were two points of light, crimson and blazing. Annette’s consciousness was swallowed up by darkness.

The next thing the girl knew, she was lying on an operating table. Though her consciousness had clearly returned, the fact she remained unable to move so much as a finger was probably due to those burning eyes.

Off to the right there were sounds of a fierce altercation.

“Will you not cease this already?”

The voice was that of Countess Genevieve.

“Don’t interfere in this.”

That was the grand duke.

“*He* is waiting. Just one more step, and our aims will be achieved. Surely you must understand what a fabulous future this will unlock for the Nobility. And not

for the Nobility alone!”

“This will serve humanity as well? Have you not noticed? You are living in the past. You remain a slave to a nightmare you cannot escape!”

The voice of persuasion was joined by the sound of a heavy impact, which then became a scream. Far past Annette’s head, there was the noise of a body slamming into a wall or something else.

An overwhelming presence approached Annette.

“No, don’t,” she said, her mouth moving. Though she couldn’t guess what was going to happen next, the fact that it was happening *to her* inspired terror far beyond imagining.

The presence stopped beside the table. Immediately his words rained down on her.

“Child, you shall be an invaluable lamb sacrificed for a greater purpose. Chances are you will not survive. However, by giving your life and soul, you will truly bring us one step closer to our goal. You have my gratitude!”

“Stop it!”

Annette tried madly to undo her bonds. Not so much as a strand of her hair stirred.

“What are you talking about?! Don’t do this. Help me, Daddy. Mommy!”

“Everyone called out as you do.”

In Annette’s heart, a faint hope sparked. She’d felt a sadness in the grand duke’s voice she didn’t recall ever hearing there before.

“I understand how you feel,” he continued. “It is not as if you were born to meet such a fate. Weep if you will. Joanne, Peter, Rita, Agnes, Tevis—all tortured me so. Turn my blood to ice. Give unto me such sadness it will still my heart. And always remember this: when your cries and pleas reach my ears, it is not that I’m unmoved. I am no murderer. Yet I must play the murderer. The surgery system I developed was not conceived to open your abdomen without the benefit of anesthesia and pull your heart out. My hands were not made to toy with your brains and turn them to pulp. Yet a greater purpose commands that I do so. Do

not hate me alone. Though *he* was insistent, I, Grand Duke Drago, spent seventy long days in deliberation before deciding to take part in this project. Ah, if there is a God, let His punishment be swift. The moment our aim is achieved, let me be torn limb from limb. That would be fitting retribution for what I have become."

Annette's mind was thoroughly deranged. Considering her position, the giant's confessions were the ramblings of a madman. They were nonsense. A murderer's contrition counted for nothing. However, it conveyed to Annette a mournfulness that surpassed mere sincerity. Once the giant's ends had properly been met, he would undoubtedly tear himself to pieces.

"Forgive me."

His voice, doleful and choked with anguish, brought Annette back to deadly reality. What was he going to do? What would happen? Her heart stopped.

"Stop this!"

In the time it took the girl to realize that desperate cry had come from the countess, the giant's presence moved away. There was a clamor that dwarfed the earlier altercation, and it came from almost the same vicinity. There was a breeze and a different presence drawing nearer, and then a pale hand touched Annette's brow—and the spell over her was broken.

As the countess undid the girl's straps one after another, Annette stared at her in amazement. Far off to the right, between mechanisms of unknown purpose, the grand duke was pulling his massive form to its feet while purple sparks showered him. Apparently the force of his impact had shorted the machinery. The thought that somewhere inside her this delicate woman had power enough to throw that giant actually frightened Annette.

Undoing the last of the straps, the countess said, "Flee," and pointed to a distant doorway. "Your hero is just outside. I wished for such a husband."

After being told to hurry and getting a push to her back, Annette got down off the table and started to run. Halfway there, she looked back.

The countess had just leapt right in front of the grand duke. With her elegant skirt gathered up, she delivered a savage kick to the giant's jaw. As the grand duke reeled backward his right hand swung around, and the countess was

pitched hard against the floor. Annette saw brains spill onto the floor from the countess's head.

Why would she do all this for me? the girl wondered. She'd heard that humans captured by the Nobility were either drained of their blood and made into servants, or else used as playthings or the subjects of weird experiments. And that was correct. However, there was no denying that at present a Noblewoman was engaged in deadly combat in order to protect her, a human. Head split open, the woman crawled across the floor.

I've got to help her.

The giant was closing on the girl. Though he was still over thirty feet away, the wind he whipped up and his unearthly aura buffeted her face. Fear forced Annette toward the doorway.

The iron door was open. She probably had the countess to thank for that, as well.

As soon as Annette was through it, from off to the right a voice called to her, "Little lady!"

There was no need to ask who it was.

"Pikk—you came to find me?"

"No, to *rescue* you."

Annette set off behind the boy with the daring smile, but then she tumbled forward. The sudden lull in the strain had swept the legs out from under her. As soon as he noticed, Pikk came back, and with one glance he knew what was going on. Without so much as a cluck of his tongue he squatted down and lifted Annette.

"Think you can walk?" he asked.

"No."

No sooner did Annette notice the boy bending down than the next thing she knew he was carrying her on his back.

"Are you okay?!"

“Yeah, I’ll manage,” the boy replied. “A long time ago the village I lived in was attacked by the Nobility, and I ran around in the mountains all night long with Mom and my little sister on my back. Had to stop and rest about a hundred times, though.”

“What became of your mother?”

“We finally reached a valley with another village, and the Nobility attacked there too—and that time they got her. Got ’em both.”

Annette didn’t know what to say.

“Put the stakes through both their hearts myself.”

Annette had the wind knocked out of her. It wasn’t all that strange. On the Frontier, almost everyone had had similar experiences, but she asked, “How old were you then?”

“Eight, I suppose.”

An eight-year-old boy driving stakes through his mother’s and sister’s chests—Annette tried to push the cruelty of it all from her head, but she didn’t fare well. Instead, however, she got a clearer sense of the broadness of the boy’s back and the strength of his gait than anyone anywhere.

Something hot slid along the side of her nose. Just as she finished desperately fighting a hiccupping sob, behind them a cry of rage went up.

The grand duke was out. What about Countess Genevieve?

“Damn it, here he comes,” said Pikk. “And we were so close to getting to that car.”

“It’s no use. We’ll never make it.”

“You’ll never make anything if you always think it’s no use. You’ll have to go on and board it alone. I’ll hold off this bastard!”

“You’re not going to escape with me?” Annette asked, surprise lowering her tone.

“Well, I’m your guard.”

“I fired you.”

“Well, I’m a volunteer guard. Don’t you worry yourself about it.”

The auto-car platform came into view. Taking the distance to it and the speed of whoever was closing on them from behind into account, Pikk thought to himself, *We might not make it.*

“Ouff?!”

There was a cry of surprise, and just a brief moment later a thud from the ground. When Pikk turned to look, his eye caught sight of the giant sprawled on all fours, like he’d made a dive.

“Help from Heaven above.”

The auto-car was a four-seater. Loading Annette in first, Pikk then got in and started it up.

The giant, now rising to his feet, rapidly dwindled in the distance.

“We’re in luck!” the boy exclaimed. “We just might make it out this way, eh?”

“Think we’ll manage?”

“At the moment, not really. Sure would be nice if God were to lend us a hand, though.”

“Huh?” Annette said, listening attentively.

“What’s wrong?” Pikk asked.

The girl just cocked her head and said, “I don’t know. It’s just, I was certain I heard someone say, ‘Would you settle for little ol’ me?’”

“What the hell’s that supposed to mean?”

With that, Pikk forgot all about what Annette had said. The auto-car would soon reach its final stop.

“So, what do we do next?” Annette asked apprehensively. She’d told the boy she could walk now and was no longer on his back.

“Ain’t it obvious? We get outta this creepy train.”

“But in order to do that you’d have to get it to stop first. Jumping off would be suicide!”

“That’s why we’re going to the engine room now.”

Annette was astonished.

“The engine room—can you operate this thing?!”

“Sure.”

“That’s fantastic! Where’d you learn to do that?”

Pikk furrowed his brow. “Out in the sticks. They had a steam engine that was a lot like this.”

“A steam engine? Are you talking about some half-assed bumpkin railway line?”

“Hey, no need to call ’em half-assed.”

“I think it’d be best not to lump this train in with some countrified steam locomotive, wouldn’t you say?”

“Oh, is that a fact?” Pikk said, turning away in a snit. “Anyway, let’s get moving. We don’t have any other play. If I can’t operate the thing, I’ll bust its engine and make it stop.”

“You’re out of your mind!” the dumbfounded Annette shot back.

The boy gave her an equally disgusted look. “You talk about this like you’re just on the sidelines. I’m doing all of this for *you*!”

“Don’t take that patronizing tone with me. No one ever asked for your help!”

“You got a problem with that?”

“No, *you’ve* got a problem with that!”

Just as their argument was beginning to escalate, figures alighted from the ceiling to stand before the pair.

“What the hell?!” Pikk exclaimed, backing away.

Annette couldn’t say a word.

“Did you think you merely needed to board the auto-car to make good your escape?” Xeno Gorshin asked, stark fangs bared.

“We were waiting outside the operating room all along on orders from the

grand duke," Benelli added, giving Annette an impassioned look utterly at odds with the image his garb projected.

"How come you let us be this long?!" Pikk asked, stepping in front of Annette to shield her.

"Because if we waited until you believed yourself safe, your despair would be all the greater."

Gorshin's fine jacket shook in time to his laughter. Apparently it was a bit large for him.

"You sick Nobles."

Pikk planted one foot and was ready to spring on them, but then thought better of it. He had a responsibility to guard Annette. However, now faced by these two Noblemen who were even more wicked and powerful than before, he wasn't sure if he'd ultimately be able to fulfill that duty.

The vibrations of the train came to the boy faintly—yet far stronger than always. It was a moment later that the shaking took on a mass like solid rock and slammed against all of them.

THE HELLFIGHTER EXPRESS

chapter 10

I

Screaming, the two Noblemen were pitched to the rear. As Annette, too, flew into the air, Pikk grabbed her by the arm, and before his eyes the bulkhead loomed closer. He planted his feet with strength enough to offset the shockwave. Annette stopped in midair—in truth his pull was perfectly balanced with the push of the shockwave, leaving her floating, but to Pikk it seemed nothing less than a miracle. And he continued to think so even after Annette quickly fell to the floor, and, once he'd confirmed that she was okay, he turned his eyes to his ankle—which he could see had a pale, disembodied hand wrapped around it.

"Th-that's—?!" the boy stammered, eyes wide.

"D's left hand. You probably remember my voice," it said to him.

"D?!" His name had the same effect as spring water sipped out in the blazing heat.

"That's right," the hoarse voice replied. "Okay, let's hustle. Those two will be on us in no time!"

"Hell, I know that. Are you okay?"

Annette nodded yes.

"Okay, now let's find an emergency door and get outta here."

The left hand protested Pikk's suggestion. "No, we stay inside. *He's* looking for the grand duke."

"He—you mean D?"

"Bingo."

"But we can't stay like this. For starters, why'd the train make an emergency stop?"

“I don’t know that, either,” the hoarse voice replied.

“Here they come!” Annette cried shrilly, pointing up ahead.

From the other end of the corridor a pair of figures were taking shape, and they were filled with madness.

“Go back,” the left hand said tersely. “There’s a stairwell on the right. Climb it.”

Panting for breath, they finished their climb at a vast hall. Luxurious sofas and a bar were arranged along a row of oversized windows. As Pikk surveyed their surroundings, an incredibly soft melody flowed into his ears. The musicians assembled at one end of the hall were bringing life to their golden instruments. However, their outlines were somehow indistinct, and the background bled through them. They were three-dimensional projections—phantoms. After thousands of years, they finally had an audience before them. The song was so beautiful and their performance so splendid both Pikk and Annette forgot that they were being pursued and listened for a while.

Pikk soon returned to his senses, however, and seeing that the door to their right was fairly close, he shouted, “That way!”

The figure in formalwear who’d bounded over from the stairwell landed soundlessly right in front of the boy. When Pikk turned to look, he found Annette standing stiff as a board, and before her stood the man with an air that called to mind a monk.

“Shiiit.”

Pikk’s eyes darted down by his feet, but he found neither hide nor hair of the left hand.

“It’s just about time to end this game,” Benelli said, nasty incisors visible between his lips. “Before we bring you back to the grand duke, we’ll twist off a few of your limbs—or better yet, one of your breasts. Yes, come to me.”

Around the man who’d so resembled a monk there lingered an air so unearthly it made Annette’s blood run cold. The great scythe on his back glittered to the lachrymose melody.

“Stay away from me,” Annette groaned, on the verge of passing out.

“Keep it together. You bastards lay a finger on the little lady and you’ll be sorry!” Pikk barked, his threat echoing vainly through the hall.

Gorshin stepped forward. But his body swam in the air. Though he tried to maintain balance through a series of hopscotch-like jumps, his trailing leg shot up high and he tumbled forward. Just as the grand duke had done when chasing after Pikk and Annette.

As Benelli looked down at the floor in amazement, a gleam shot up from it to pierce his left eye. What the Nobleman saw was the exquisite left hand that’d come free of Gorshin’s leg. The iron skewer spat from the palm of that hand was the same one Benelli himself had once used. On this left hand!

The regenerative powers of a vampire would be enough to instantaneously reconstruct the ravaged lens and retina. And yet the blood loss and hellish pain from Benelli’s eye persisted.

“Run for it!” the left hand shrieked at Pikk as it sailed through the air. This bound was accomplished purely through the flexing strength of its fingers and joints. It clamped onto Gorshin’s face just as he was about to pick himself back up, with white smoke coming from it at the same time and Gorshin arching back in agony. Before the Nobleman could attempt to pry the limb free, the left hand clambered down to the floor. Bright blood spilled from the tiny mouth that’d formed in the palm of the hand, swiftly dissolving the floor. Within its own “body” the left hand had manufactured a powerful acid—or rather, blood that carried a corrosive poison.

“Unlike wounds from humans,” the hoarse voice remarked, “these don’t heal easily. Should be that way for a couple of days. I hope they enjoy the pain.”

A deeply wrinkled guffaw shook the elegant melody.

As they listened to the fleeing footsteps of the pair, Gorshin and Benelli were powerless to do anything. It was several minutes later that Benelli extracted the iron skewer and Gorshin got to his feet. In Gorshin’s melted ruin of a face, his left eye alone was tinged with a hateful vermilion hue.

“Mustn’t let them escape.”

“After them!”

Their words pared down by rage, the young Noblemen were about to rush to the door on the far side of the room when an aura gusting up from behind the pair stopped them.

Before they could turn to look, a deep voice said, “Nobles, eh?”

The pair turned around.

Two figures stood by the stairwell. From their garb it was easy enough to tell they were either itinerant warriors or Hunters. But what sent tension and surprise shooting down the two Noblemen’s backs was the aura of the pair and the fangs that peeked from the thin smirks on their vermilion lips.

As if putting the query to the darkness, Gorshin said, “You two are Hunters?”

“We *were*,” said a black face. It wasn’t a matter of skin tone. The man’s whole face was covered with whiskers. His ears were pointed, like inverted fangs, and his hands were also strangely hirsute. “No, I guess even now we still are,” he continued. “Seems you boys *used to be* kin to Lord Gillian, isn’t that right?”

Nothing from the Noblemen.

“But the air of evil you radiate isn’t the same as Lord Gillian’s. Someone fed on you, right?” said a pudgy man with a short spear in hand. He had an old-fashioned revolver tucked through his belt.

“Lord Gillian? I see. He was our leader. However, Grand Duke Drago is our master now,” Gorshin replied. Both his voice and his eyes quavered with a feeling that bordered on consternation.

In truth, both he and Benelli were at a loss as to how they should deal with these new arrivals. Though they’d started off as foes, both men had received the kiss from Gillian, so they were now their kind. However, now the two young Noblemen weren’t Gillian’s compatriots, but were in service to Grand Duke Drago. Still, Gorshin and Benelli couldn’t say for certain that that made them adversaries. Gillian’s aim—the capture of Annette—was also the goal of the grand duke’s subordinates. It wasn’t wholly unreasonable to say they might yet cooperate.

The pair before them seemed to feel the same. The hairy one said, “Lord Gillian’s blood carries memories of the name Grand Duke Drago. Never thought we’d hear it here, though. Seems he’s quite a strange character, and you say he’s here?”

“Indeed. Though it is unclear why he’s risen again, it would seem it was to repeat some experiments from the past. Toward that end he desires the girl. The two of you must stand down.”

The two intruders had listened in silence, but at that point they both grinned. Stark white fangs poked from lips that seemed too red for any man.

“We didn’t quite know what to do with you boys, but now you’ve just made it real clear. As in, this is where we throw down.”

Following up on what the hairy one had said in a beastly tone, the other added, “Lord Gillian will have that girl. You boys are the ones who’ll have to stand down. No, you don’t really need to do even that. Right here and now, we’ll make it so you can’t stand down or stand in our way.”

The pudgy man gave the short spear in his right fist a light spin, then braced it with both hands with such skill Gorshin’s breath escaped him. His eyes as well as Benelli’s gleamed, and their bodies burned with the lust for battle. The Noblemen, too, wanted nothing more than to fight.

“Leica Slopey’s the name,” the hairy young man said by way of introduction.

“I’m known as—the Confessor. You’ll see why soon enough,” the pudgy man told them in a stocky tone.

“Fitting names for servants,” Xeno Gorshin said, licking his chops. “We are not in the habit of giving humans our names, but as you have Lord Gillian’s blood in you, we shall introduce ourselves. I am Xeno Gorshin.”

“They call me Benelli. You may take that to your grave.”

“Is that all?” the stocky man with the short spear—the Confessor—blurted out, though it seemed a non sequitur.

It was only natural that Benelli furrowed his brow.

The Confessor continued, “Hear me out, everyone. My father was Xeno Milco,

and my mother Beatrice Mesclure. However, I am not my father's child."

Gorshin's breath escaped him once more, and he shot a glance at the monk.

"What sort of prank is this?" Benelli asked the man. The Nobleman didn't seem agitated. His expression didn't change until the Confessor continued.

"My real father was a human man who served my 'father' before I was born. His name was Kosuth Dorre. Before entering my father's service, he was a vagrant loitering in the nearby village. He raided the garbage for scraps to eat and shit in the woods or the stream. Xeno Milco hired my real father for one reason alone—he was paying to use him as a stud."

This was a "confession" that anyone could tell would not go unpunished.

Benelli's face blackened with rage. "You bastard . . . Shut your mouth. You're lying . . . Lies! My father was Xeno Milco. Pure Greater Nobility."

"That I don't deny. Xeno Milco was, without a doubt, a Greater Noble. A man who could move mountain chains with a single hand. But not a single drop of his bold, highborn blood runs in my veins. The genes that make me what I am come from the lowest scum of the human race—that of a *garbage-eater*. In a manner of speaking, I am a charlatan passing himself off under the name of a great Nobleman."

That was why he was known as the Confessor? How did he know Benelli's secrets?

When the bizarre and horrible "confession" reached this point, the Nobleman went berserk.

"Stop it. Stop it!"

With that scream the great scythe flashed out, but the Confessor deflected it with his short spear, and as he made a massive leap back, the pudgy man then hurled his weapon. The power of being made a servant of Lord Gillian had been added to his original skill, and his short spear took Benelli right through the heart as the Nobleman was on the return swing of his scythe.

Staggering, Benelli yanked out the short spear. Fresh blood spewed out with astounding force, splashing the scythe where he'd dropped it on the floor.

“Don’t forget,” the Nobleman said, almost murmuring the words, “’Benelli’ means ‘the Grim Reaper.’ No matter what blood runs in my veins.” And sending up a bloody mist he fell.

One was slain—confidence and the thrill of victory lulled Leica and the Confessor.

“Leave this to me,” Leica said, stepping forward. And when he did so, he saw red jewels spill from the mouth of the remaining Nobleman in formalwear—who didn’t so much as glance at his compatriot who’d been reduced to dust.

Instinctively sensing danger, the two former Hunters split up, one going in either direction. The beads Gorshin had blown at them split into two groups, with each following one of the targets. Though the Confessor made it down the stairwell, Leica was too slow. As he was racing for the stairs, one of the beads burst right in front of him; bright blood streamed from his mouth, nose, and ears, and he was left clawing at his chest and throat as he practically tumbled down the stairwell.

“Lousy monsters,” was all Gorshin spat, though it hardly seemed appropriate coming from the likes of him.

His eyes fell on the dust-covered robe that lay beside him. Would he offer a prayer? No, he kicked at his friend’s remains like a man possessed.

“Filthy *imposter*! It is only fitting you should meet your end at the hands of those *poor imitations*!”

And having shouted that, Gorshin bolted off toward the door on the far side of the room through which Pikk and Annette had disappeared.

II

Pikk and Annette had finally come to realize that this train wasn’t merely a means of transportation, it was its own little world. It was simply too big. It was more like a huge hotel than a train, and more like a town than a hotel.

In what appeared to be a factory the boy looked up to find his field of view filled by things that could’ve been either enormous pistons or bars repeating bizarre movements that clearly bore no relationship to the laws of physics, but

when Pikk saw that the motion of one would transfer to another his eyes went wide.

“What the hell is this? Some kind of factory?”

“It’s the engine room.”

The reply came from his back, and the boy bugged his eyes. Turning his back toward Annette, he asked, “Is there something on me?”

“The left hand—it’s clinging to you,” the girl said, her voice sounding hollow. Although mentally she’d been through the wringer, the actual cause was physical exhaustion.

“When did you latch onto me, jerk?”

“Don’t make a big deal about this,” the hoarse voice replied. “I couldn’t have been very heavy!”

“What the hell are you? And why are you stuck on D?”

“Because someone stuck me there.”

“Who?”

“Never mind that, the enemy’s getting closer!”

The boy and girl became stone statues.

“I know, you think you’ve run pretty far already, but there’s more than just the grand duke and those other two after you. The ones who got on a little while ago probably are, too.”

“Got on? You mean during that stop?”

“When else?”

“But how could they stop this beast?” asked the boy. “Was there an old station left or something?”

“Somebody must’ve had power enough to make it stop.”

Pikk fell silent. Fear was giggling somewhere around the scruff of his neck. The being who’d halted the train was now onboard and coming after them. He felt like an animal pursued by a pack of a thousand huntsmen.

“Where’s D? If we keep going this way, will we meet up with him for sure? This train’s like a whole damn town!”

“I’ve got faith in him.”

“Really?”

“Yep.”

“To hell with you,” Pikk said.

“We’ll run into him sooner or later. It’s fate. Believe it.”

“That’s a load of self-serving bullshit!”

The furious boy reached both arms around to his back, but the left hand deftly evaded them. When Pikk was finally out of breath, the hoarse voice said to him, “Let’s take a rest here. Missy over there’s out of juice, too.”

“Yeah, let’s do that,” Pikk said, slumping to the floor.

Annette was already lying down, the result of a double punch of fear and fatigue. Sweat dripped from her pale forehead.

Down on the floor the left hand snapped its fingers. A schematic of the train appeared in midair.

“Our present location is here. That freezer compartment would be about there. Wow, that’s like three-quarters of a mile. A hell of a distance.”

The left hand put its thumb and little finger together against the floor. Most likely this was a habit it had when it was troubled. To Pikk it looked like the hand was sitting cross-legged, which the boy found amusing.

Still, this creature had to be more than just a living hand, judging by the skill it’d shown in tripping the grand duke and knocking over Gorshin. It must’ve been the hand that’d saved him and Annette from flying through the air with the force of the train’s emergency stop. However, a hand normally had power because there was a body to support it and allow it to perform various feats. The boy couldn’t imagine how it could’ve stopped the two of them when they were thrown into the air. All he could think was that it could do it *because it was D’s hand*.

“You all right?” the boy said to Annette.

“Yeah,” she replied, but she was panting for breath.

“Sorry. I’ll put you on my back again.”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the girl said, staring at Pikk. Her eyes had a light that defied explanation. “You’ve already carried me so far. I’m sorry, I must’ve been really heavy for you.”

“Don’t sweat it. If I couldn’t walk around with a girl on my back, I wouldn’t be much of a man!”

In his zeal he showed her his pearly teeth, but that was as much as he could muster. Pikk slowly slumped over and immediately began snoring.

“He’s shot to pieces,” said the hoarse voice. “You’ve gotta be pretty beat, too, but the kid’s ten times more worn out.”

“All for me . . . But why . . . Why do all this for me?”

“I don’t know for sure, but I guess that’s just how humans are. And it ain’t just because you’re a woman. The squirt isn’t the sort to just leave anybody weak in a bad spot. And when it comes to the woman he loves, I think he’d gamble his life and soul in battle and still die with a smile on his face. No matter how selfish the object of his affection might be.”

Annette gazed at the profile of the slumbering boy. She looked at him in a way that said if she took her eyes off him, she’d lose him. Cracked lips murmured something. And hot on its heels came a flood of tears.

“That is correct,” said a soft female voice that flowed up from behind them, but even then the girl wasn’t surprised.

The left hand turned itself around.

Beneath rows of silently working pistons, Countess Genevieve was headed toward them in a dazzling dress. On reaching the pair and the disembodied limb, the Noblewoman halted and looked down at the boy. Her eyes had the same light as Annette’s.

“As you just said, he has gambled his life and soul—and did so to safeguard *your* life and soul. Two thousand years ago,” the Noblewoman said as if she were

singing the words, “the directors of the Noble Mental Research Center in the Capital were forced to make public a certain conclusion as a result of long years of experimentation toward destroying the human psyche. Listen well, little miss. They said, and I quote: *Though the human mind may be driven mad, it is impossible to destroy. For it is supported by the soul.* What saved you is something that glows in the heart of that dirty, uncouth little boy, the soul that we call humanity. No one can see it, the person who possesses it may not even realize it, but even once life has left them it will continue to make humans glow with humanity forever.”

At some point Annette had sat up, and now she was staring at the countess. It resembled in no small part something the Noblewoman and the girl knew only from legends of the distant past, a scene of the common people listening raptly to the words of a priest in a place called a church out in the grassy countryside.

“Now, come with me,” the countess urged. As Annette eyed her anxiously she told the girl, “Whether it be to leave here or to see that gorgeous Hunter, I shall lead you wherever you wish to go.”

“Do you know where D is?” the girl asked.

“I knew where *you* were.”

“Okay, let’s stick with her.”

The left hand sounded almost glib, and that decided it for Annette.

“Get up.”

The left hand clambered onto the boy’s forehead, and Pikk soon awakened. One look at the countess and he braced for bare-fisted combat, but after Annette explained the situation he reluctantly came to terms with it.

“I don’t trust no Nobles, but in this case we ain’t got a choice. Pull anything funny, though, and I’ll run you through the heart where you stand!”

“Understood, my fine boy.”

“Shut up, and stop smiling.”

Once the boy had managed to make it to his feet, the countess suddenly turned and looked back the way she’d come. Every inch of her gave off tension—

and a sense of horror.

“You feeling that?” the left hand asked her. “Somebody with an incredible aura is headed this way. And you can bet they’ve noticed us.”

“Who?” Annette asked, her face instantly growing paler.

“D,” the left hand and the countess said in unison.

“Or so I’d like to tell you, but this is a lot worse,” the hoarse voice continued. “This is someone with about as much power as D, but not a Noble. Of course, they ain’t human either.”

“Fall back—flee to the rear.”

Perhaps sensing something in the countess’s tone, the left hand inquired, “A friend of yours?”

“Yes. One of the ‘failures’ from long, long ago. For more than five millennia the grand duke and I conducted experiments here, and occasionally it resulted in something like this. Flee, and be quick about it. What’s headed this way is the most fearsome sort of living dead in the world. And it is of our making.”

“What the hell is that?” Pikk asked, rubbing his eyes.

Making a puzzled expression, the countess said, “Do you not remember?”

“Remember what?”

“Ah, the shock must’ve been so great you’ve completely forgotten. You have no memory of those who writhe in the train’s basement. Thank God for that. If God exists, that is.” In a stern tone she then told the stupefied Pikk to go.

III

“What are you gonna do, ma’am?”

“Ma’am?” The anger lingered on her face for only a moment, but the countess seemed to detect something in a doorway where nothing could yet be seen, and she gave both Pikk and Annette a push on the shoulder.

Just then a figure lurched into view. It was a man, nearly six foot eight and completely naked. A pair of vacant eyes were set in his rustic face. Long, thick chains dangled from the fetters he wore on either wrist. The man had wrapped

those lengths of chain around his hands time and time again. Dragging along the floor at the end of each chain were roughly a foot-and-a-half square chunks of what looked to be stone.

His muddied eyes reflected the countess and Pikk. Perhaps his bizarre brain made some sort of decision, because in the blink of an eye his demeanor became colored by madness and murderous intent, and the man pressed forward with broad strides.

Countess Genevieve stood in front of him, barring the way.

“I will not let you pass.”

The Noblewoman’s tone was actually rather soft and sad, and the man halted and gazed at her with wonder.

“I remember you, Shank Pomerolo—you were a schoolteacher, were you not? It was we who made you this way. And I wish I could allow you to destroy the train, to kill me, to do whatever you desire, but there are children I must see set free—though telling you as much will only anger you, I suppose. You wanted to be set free, too. Both he and I have agonized over this for five thousand years. I am sorry. It can hardly serve as an atonement, but I must have you go back to sleep again.”

And as she said that, her lithe form flew through the air like a butterfly.

The man swung his left hand. The chain with the block of stone attached whistled as it arced through the air. Impact—the instant it appeared to take place, the countess’s body flowed up as if borne on the wind, going over the man’s head. And as she landed on his shoulder, she still looked like a magnificent butterfly. However, as she hauled back to strike with the golden dagger in her right hand, every inch of her was sheathed in an aura of murderous intent.

With the monstrous strength of a vampire, it would’ve been possible not only to pierce the man’s heart but to rip it right out of his chest. However, a split second before the countess could bring the blade down, a black streak of lightning zipped by her eyes. Bright blood flew. Blood spilled from the throat of Countess Genevieve as she fell flat on her back.

The *thing* that’d just ripped her throat open braced both feet against a pipe a

good sixty feet away and turned back in her direction. Noble blood dripped from the crimson-stained claws of its left hand, and the mouth below its pronounced snout exposed an alarming set of teeth. Who could've imagined that this was the true nature of the young man calling himself Leica Slopey—that he was a werewolf.

Giving a growl in a voice that was now that of a beast, Leica twisted his body around and, with miraculous jumping ability, bounded for the man. There was a whistle that left the air churning, and then with a brutal *whump!* the beast man was slammed against the floor. His face was flattened, and broken ribs protruded from his chest. Yet when the block of stone was brought down again without a moment's hesitation, it sank into the floor, the werewolf beneath it having leapt clear with a skill that seemed unbelievable even for one of its kind.

Bright blood fell from the snarling maw. Undeniable lunacy filled his eyes. The way he'd just attacked seemed to be completely lacking in common sense. He seemed to be snapping at people entirely at random. And that was precisely the case. Leica had gone mad. Earlier, Xeno Gorshin's blood beads had scattered virulent poison right before his snout. It had besieged not his immortal flesh but his brain. Now he was no more than an insane wild beast that would attack any living creature it saw and wouldn't be satisfied until it had ripped everyone to shreds.

With a howl Leica pounced on the man. His wide-open mouth caught the man's head, tearing it off on the first attempt. Giving the head one good shake, the beast spat it into the air.

The man extended his hand and grabbed it. The head was pressed right back onto the wound.

At the same time the werewolf reeled backward. When Leica had touched down from his leap, a dagger had pierced his chest.

"As I thought, you are no better than a beast. Do you think the Nobility mere prey?"

Due perhaps to the severity of her wound, Countess Genevieve murmured the words in a low, hoarse voice as she stood there covering her bloodstained lips.

As the werewolf fell he tried to extract the dagger, but as his hands had

become a wolf's paws, he was unable to seize the weapon by the grip.

Looking over at the man, the countess tilted her head to one side. Only a faint red line remained where the wounds had been aligned. Slowly the chains in both his hands began to spin. Slightly bowing her upper body, the countess struck a free-form defensive stance.

"What's this?!" she exclaimed, her body convulsing. "Persistent beast, isn't he?"

The man let the stone blocks fly with both hands. Skillfully evading them, the countess moved in a certain direction. The sight of her lightly slipping between the chains and their blocks of stone as they whistled through the air was pure artistry. And at a certain spot she halted.

Overhead, a block of stone arced down at her. That was what the countess had been waiting for. Directly below the block of stone was the head of Leica—the werewolf. His head caught several tons of pressure in an instant, and both it and his brains became one with the floor.

Spinning herself around in the same direction Pikk had fled, the countess said, "I shall see you again later," and smiled at the giant ready to pursue her before dashing off with the wind swirling in her wake.

When the countess reached the doorway, Pikk appeared from the shadows and said, "Ma'am."

"What are you doing? I believe I told you to flee. What of the young lady?"

"She's got D's left hand to protect her. That's safer than being with me."

"And you—why are you still here?"

Pikk made a doleful expression.

"You came back, is that it? You foolish lad," the countess said with a sigh, but the boy gave her a stiff smile.

"I couldn't help it. It's what any man would do."

"You truly are foolish, aren't you—you humans."

Her lovely voice flowed forward. As Pikk hastened forward to support her

falling body, something glittered right by his nose. There was a dagger stuck in the countess's back.

"Wh-wh-what's this?" the boy sputtered.

"Could you pull it out? It's too late to save me, but it would be slightly less painful."

"Who did this to you?"

"The hairy one. He was a werewolf. As he couldn't extract it with his hands, he gripped it with his mouth. He must've hurled it in the same manner."

Though Pikk didn't really comprehend everything the countess was saying, it was clear enough that her wound would be fatal.

"What should I do?" asked the boy. "Is there some medicine somewhere?"

"No, there isn't. The tip of the blade reached my heart. I shall last a bit longer, but even you must understand that I'm finished, do you not?"

The boy had no reply for that.

"The reason I fled was because I thought to help you both escape before I am no more. Come—I shall lead you to D's location."

"You know where he is?"

"Essentially. You see, D gives off an air quite similar to that of the 'failure' just now. I believe I can locate him."

"But you're hurt real bad."

"If I do nothing, the outcome will remain the same."

"Okay," Pikk said with a huge nod, gazing at the countess. His eyes gleamed with deep emotion. It wasn't the sort of look humans gave Nobility. "Okay, let's hustle back to the other two, then."

As the countess was about to start walking, the boy offered her his shoulder to lean on. Looking intently at the little man, the countess thanked him.

However, when they raced back to where Annette and the left hand waited, they found neither of them there, only an expanse of floor splattered with fresh blood.

“But I told ’em to wait here! What’s with this blood?”

Even the boy’s tone was dazed, and from it the countess could sense his impatience. Wiping up some blood with the tip of her index finger, she licked it. She then closed her eyes, but quickly said, “This aura—it’s the grand duke’s.”

“What, him? How’d he know to look here?”

“He designed this train. Do you not think he can tell at a glance where everyone is?”

“Oh, I get it. Then the left hand was—”

“Most likely defeated. This is its blood. For the moment, be at ease.”

“Oh my God,” Pikk said, and he began to recite a prayer for the dead his mother had taught him. Then in a voice firm with resolve he asked, “Where is she?”

The boy had thought himself ready, but this required a whole new level of determination.

“The laboratory. Coarser tongues call it an operating room, though I believe that too is accurate.”

The two of them set off on foot. After five minutes advancing down a corridor that seemed like an opulent hotel lobby, Pikk halted. About twenty to twenty-five feet up ahead, he’d seen a lovely female head poke around the corner. Though the boy had instinctively pressed himself flat against the wall, the woman had quickly ducked back around the corner.

“You see that?” Pikk asked.

The countess nodded.

“Stay here. I’m gonna go check it out.”

“Don’t,” Genevieve said, but her words met only the boy’s back.

With stealthy footfalls he sprinted to the corner, peeked around it—and there was a man standing right in front of him. Over six and a half feet tall and with a powerful chest, his very presence overwhelmed the boy.

“What the hell?” Pikk blurted out in spite of himself.

The face attached to that muscular frame was that of the lovely woman he'd glimpsed a moment ago.

"Who are you?" the beauty's red lips asked in a youthful, masculine voice. "What are you doing here? I'd heard that Grand Duke Drago owned this train. Is he still alive?"

"How about you—who the hell are *you*?" Pikk inquired even as he backed away.

"Me?"

The beautiful face donned a smirk. Pikk could've kicked himself for not noticing quicker. Never had he seen such an evil grin. This sissy face was rotten to the core.

"I'm Barry Dawn. I used to be a Hunter, but now I've received the kiss from Lord Gillian and serve him. Kid, why did the train start up? Who in blazes is on it?"

"Well, the grand duke started it up. Don't know quite where, but he's on it somewhere. But all that aside, you called yourself a Hunter and now you serve Lord Gillian—put the bite on you, did he?"

"That's about the size of it."

The lovely feminine face grinned. Seeing those lips, Pikk knew what fate had in store for him.

"Any others beside you?"

"Yeah," Barry Dawn replied. "Three more—and all of us regret our past. Because we used to be so insanely dedicated to destroying something as wonderful as the Nobility."

Pikk made a gagging sound as despair filled his heart. Friend or foe, everyone around him was a lousy vampire.

"By the way, kid, did you know you've got real nice color?" Barry Dawn said, his eyes beginning to blaze with red. "Truth be told, ever since I got like this an endless hunger's been gnawing at me. Give me some of that blood of yours."

TRIUMPHAL HYMN OF THE NOBILITY

chapter 11

I

“No way in hell!” the boy refused flatly, though his voice quavered. “I hate Nobles, but I hate wannabe Nobles even more. I’m outta here!”

As he kicked off the floor like a scared rabbit, there was a streak of light behind him. However, by that point Pikk’s feet were pounding the floor a good fifteen feet away. Flames shot up around the boy’s feet.

“Wh-what the—?!” he stammered, leaping away, but the next spot around Pikk’s feet also burst into flames.

Now the boy had fallen flat on his ass, and Barry Dawn waggled a longsword that looked to measure more than six and a half feet at him, saying, “This is my magic sword, Flare Soldier. It’s covered with human blood that I can fling around, turning it into a blade a hundred thousand degrees hot—enough to melt iron or slay my foes. Better still, it’s got a range of over thirty feet. Nobody’s ever outrun it. Okay, kid, you’d better throw in the towel and offer me that little pink neck of yours.”

“I ain’t offering you squat. My blood’s primo stuff, better than any wine you’re likely to find. If I was gonna let anyone drink it, it’d be my buddy and nobody else.”

“Your buddy? Who’s that?”

“His name’s D,” Pikk replied. “And he’s a million times better than you!”

“Precisely.”

Barry Dawn heard the countess’s voice above him. The beautiful woman who’d been clinging to the ceiling had already dropped to within six feet of him, the dagger in her right hand just waiting to flash into action. Not even unholy speed could prevent that.

However, perhaps another power made the impossible possible. The blade in the former Hunter's hands. Flare Soldier shot up, its tip running through the countess's solar plexus and exiting her back, at which point devilish flames of lotus red spread across her dress.

"Ma'am?!"

Racing over to where the Noblewoman had fallen covered in blood and flames, the boy pried the dagger from her grasp and stood ready with it. Hefting the countess onto his back like a man possessed, Pikk backed away.

As Barry Dawn watched the drama coolly, tension shot into his face. Pikk saw it too. Barry Dawn's eyes were locked on something to their rear. Could it be—

"D?!"

Pikk whipped around to see and found a figure coming from off in the distance. The boy's ballooning expectations quickly deflated. The figure had a pair of swords on his back. And the evil aura that gusted from him was unquestionably that of a Noble.

"Oh, one of the four retainers Lord Gillian mentioned—Xeno Braylow, is it? I understand ever since you got the kiss from Lord Gillian, you've wielded a pair of swords no one can break or parry. Now we're on the same side, but even though Lord Gillian's nixed any scuffles, I simply can't resist this."

Barry Dawn had the face of a beautiful maiden, but it became that of a ghastly god of war as he raised Flare Soldier, the enchanted sword he held.

A spark of hope ignited in Pikk's heart. If the vampires fought among themselves, it would give him an opening to escape.

However, as Braylow approached, he said, "I know not who you are, but that child's blood will be mine. Or not mine so much as Blue Soldier's and Gray Soldier's."

"That's too bad," said the former Hunter. "So, I have a rival now? That only makes my hunger all the stronger. You can have my scraps."

Two pairs of eyes gave off a reddish glow as they fell on Pikk.

"First, I'm going to cut both your legs off so you can't run away. This might

hurt a little, but try to be a man about it," Barry Dawn said, adjusting his grip on his longsword.

A harsh sound rang in Pikk's ears. Braylow's two swords once again sought blood.

"Cut off his legs," Braylow said in a vacant tone. "I shall take his arms off."

"Sounds good," Barry Dawn said, slowly starting toward Pikk. It was unclear whether it was Blue Soldier or Gray Soldier that Braylow drew.

"Flee," said the thin voice that crept into the ear of the almost completely despairing Pikk.

"Ma'am, you're okay?"

"Flee," the countess repeated. "Quickly."

In that instant, the weakness and doubt eating away at the boy's heart were utterly dispelled. "I can't run when a lady puts it to me like that!"

"Then you shall die for nothing!"

"That ain't true. I'll protect you, ma'am. It's just—well, if I don't pull it off, I'm sorry."

Pikk gripped the dagger. He was no longer afraid. To defend a Noblewoman, he would do battle with a true Noble and an imitation. Though it was a somewhat odd sensation, the boy thought to himself, *Sure, why not?*

Just then a hard sound began to ring out sharply. Braylow's enchanted swords had descended into madness. At the same time, Barry Dawn spun around.

A black form was bearing down on them from the same direction Pikk and Braylow had come. But how exquisite he was! The wide-brimmed traveler's hat, the jet-black coat, and the longsword on his back all seemed faintly blurry, no doubt because even the lights were bashful around him. A symphony sprang back to life in Pikk's head. There was a fanfare that resounded at the dramatic climax—yes, that was what truly suited this young man. Even the two demonic swordsmen had to admit it. Such beauty. It seemed enough to make the fighting spirit of even men such as these melt like lead. This man was entitled to be greeted with symphonies performed by the dead.

“D,” said Xeno Braylow.

“This is D?” Barry Dawn groaned.

Yes—this was D. Not even glancing at Pikk or the countess, the Hunter walked over without fear of the two fiends, an icy sculpture of unearthly beauty. However, his left hand was missing and his complexion was as pale as paraffin. Would D be able to withstand the two unholy swordsmen when they cut loose with the magic swords Flare Soldier, Blue Soldier, and Gray Soldier?

“I’ll take the child,” D told them in a low voice, a sword gleaming in his hand.

That was the call to battle. Kicking off the floor as if he were gliding, Barry Dawn swiped at the Hunter. The blow came from directly overhead, and D’s blade shot up to parry it. No, it was actually an attack. Barry Dawn’s body reeled wildly back, and with it the sword that’d been deflected, while the deadly thrust aimed at the former Hunter’s throat made fresh blood spray from him like a mist. However, the foe with the lovely female face didn’t drop, didn’t decay, but rather he jumped back a good ten feet to escape the Vampire Hunter. D’s thrust probably hadn’t been very deep due to the blood he’d lost along with his left hand.

Making no attempt to pursue Barry Dawn, D turned around. The magic swords of his second foe were no longer rattling together. Holding one blade in each hand, Braylow was slowly raising them high. In his right hand Blue Soldier had its blade slanting to the right, while Gray Soldier in his left dipped out to the left side.

D closed the dozen feet between them in a single stride. One blade came down from overhead intending to cleave him, the other sweeping from the left side in less than the blink of an eye—and both were stopped in the form of an X.

Pushing away, D changed his footing. His blade shifted to a forward position, aimed straight at his opponent. But the Hunter’s stance crumbled. The world had seemed to turn upside down. Along with him, Braylow’s blade leaned to the right. And then to the left—and once again the world spun, and D dropped to one knee. It was a second later that his back burst into flames.

“Take that, Hunter!” Barry Dawn exclaimed. “But as a favor from someone who used to be in the same line of work, I’ll finish you with my blade.”

Flare Soldier had sprayed D with the blood that could even melt iron, and now the blade was being brought down on D's head with all Barry Dawn's might. And though the Hunter should've dodged, his body was being held in place by the crossed magic swords.

In a second that would determine life or death, Barry Dawn swung his enchanted blade to the right. Though the golden dagger Pikk had thrown was struck down with disappointing ease, this gave D enough time to hurl his blade. For Braylow's concentration had also been broken.

Whistling as it arced through the air, the stark blade was parried by the pair of crossed swords, but the Hunter's steel pushed through the scissoring blades to behead Braylow spectacularly.

Off to the left, Barry Dawn had already leapt into the air. D twisted around. A sword was bearing down on him from overhead. It was too late to dodge or to parry. Black cloth ripped. An anguished cry went up. The former Hunter landed again, his blade in the same position from the blow he'd executed. It was not the swung blade that D was beneath, but rather the arms that gripped it.

Making a sound like he was going to vomit, Barry Dawn tumbled forward. And in return, D got to his feet. After adjusting the split brim of his traveler's hat, D glanced over at Barry Dawn. From his foe's back, in a spot directly behind the heart, there jutted a wooden needle. Narrowly evading Flare Soldier as it came slicing down at him, D had thrust a rough wooden needle through his foe's heart. The cry of pain had been Barry Dawn's.

But how? D hadn't been holding a needle. Both ends of the wooden needle had been honed and one end of it stuck in the stump of the Hunter's left arm, transforming it into a deadly weapon.

"That was awesome, D. Just awesome—I really respect you. I swear, someday I'll be a Hunter just like you!" the boy exclaimed, his body trembling with excitement and intense emotion. Looking down at Braylow's headless corpse, he said, "But this guy had a really great parry. Looks like it was no match for your power after all. Serves the bastard right!"

Saying nothing, D went over to Braylow and opened the front of the Nobleman's jacket with the tip of his sword. The right side of his chest was

horribly caved in.

“So, he was wounded?” said the boy. “That’s why he wanted blood so bad . . . But this is really something . . . Half his chest is busted in. Ah, it must’ve been that guy!”

“What guy?”

Pikk hurriedly told D all about the “failure” they’d encountered in the engine room. D didn’t say anything, and after hearing all that the boy had to say, he turned his gaze to Countess Genevieve, who was down on the floor staring up at him. Pikk spread his arms wide to protect her.

“No, you can’t kill this lady. She helped me and the little lady a bunch of times. Hell, she even helped your left hand!”

“And where is *it*?”

“Damned if I know. It was with the little lady, but they weren’t where we were supposed to meet up. There was blood all over the place, and the lady here said it was the left hand’s.”

“Where is the grand duke?” D asked the countess.

“The laboratory. And I won’t tell you where that is. He’s important to me, after all.”

D’s eyes gave off an eerie glow. The countess’s expression changed. Here was a young man so fierce he’d lop off her breasts or split her mouth from ear to ear if that’s what it took to loosen her tongue. However, the terrible light left his eyes all too easily. Perhaps he’d recalled the sight of her laying flowers at the graves.

As D began to quietly walk away, Pikk said, “Wait. I’m going with you!”

D didn’t even look back. Ever since they’d parted company in the desert, he and the boy had been complete strangers.

When the Hunter had advanced about fifty yards, a red delta-wing aircraft appeared from the corridor on the left. On spotting D, it halted about twenty feet off the floor. Protruding from the center of the flying machine was the stocky upper body of a middle-aged man.

“Now this is a surprise,” said the plump man, his eyes going wide. “Who knew

any man in the world could be so handsome? I'm afraid just looking at you is making me funny in the head. You're D, aren't you? I heard about you from Lord Gillian. They call me the Confessor. Originally the mayor of Krishken hired me to guard his daughter, but then Lord Gillian gave me the kiss, so now I'm in his service. I'm due to meet up with Lord Gillian soon, and now I'll have a nice souvenir for him. Your head."

D's right hand whipped out. Halfway through the arc it limned; a silvery flash zipped against the side of the flying machine, rebounding with a melodic sound. What then imbedded itself in the floor was a steel bolt.

"It's no use," said the Confessor. "This craft may be light, but it's made of one of the Nobility's supreme alloys. For all your might, not even you can break it. Now, answer my question."

The jeering laughter the pudgy man unleashed from up high halted unexpectedly. Although the Confessor nervously twisted around to scan in every direction, his gaze soon returned to D, but the shadow clinging to his face hadn't been wiped away completely. As if to erase it, he began his bizarre "confession," saying, "My name is D. My parents were—"

Groaning, the Hunter's airborne foe clutched his chest. Was this due to the strength of D's psyche? Or had some defensive system guarding his past been activated?

"This is just—?!" The Confessor's eyes bugged, and his mouth spat up blood. "It . . . it can't be . . . How could this . . ."

The eyes that peered down at D spoke of horror and astonishment that pushed the man to the brink of lunacy.

"I'm . . . Listen well, humans and Nobles! I . . . I am D, and my parents are . . ."

Perhaps it was coincidence that the long blade was put against the man's throat. A slight pull to the right and the Confessor's throat split open, spraying blood wildly. At the same time the flying machine tilted, and all too quickly it crashed against the floor.

As the Confessor stained the pilot's seat with his blood, D walked over to him.

"It was the scythe . . . His . . . Benelli's great scythe . . . Benelli . . . means Grim

Reaper . . . Said he'd just keep . . . coming . . ."

Judging from his dazed monologue, the Confessor must've really been terrified. He'd probably located that flying machine just to escape the fearsome scythe that was coming for him. But the accursed weapon had been riding on the man's back.

Behind D, Pikk called out his name. The boy had followed after the Hunter. Shooting a quick glance that way and confirming that the countess was with him, D said to the Confessor, "If you don't want to die, tell me that Noblewoman's secret. I'll bring you right to the examination room for treatment."

The Confessor raised his face. "Help me . . . Please . . ." he said.

"Where is this so-called laboratory?"

The Confessor only glanced once at Genevieve. "My name is . . . Genevieve Vasa. I am the wife of Count Cordon Vasa."

Pikk had the wind knocked out of him.

"The laboratory . . . is in a secret location. It doesn't appear in the blueprints or in any layouts . . . It was constructed as a 'special car' . . . that the grand duke and myself . . . and only a few other Nobles can enter."

"How do you reach it?"

D's tone hadn't changed at all from the very first question, yet Pikk felt like he'd been dunked headfirst into icy waters.

Less than a minute later, the Confessor breathed his last. Checking the man's pupils to be sure that this was the case, the Hunter said, "That'll do."

D started to walk off. His stride was so firm with resolve, it seemed to slice the very air. And as always, he left Pikk and Genevieve behind.

Harsh fate was bearing down on Xeno Gorshin with its usual stealthy footsteps. After the battle in which they'd lost Benelli, he'd followed Pikk and the others, but he'd lost sight of them. When they'd stopped the train and boarded, Gillian had ordered everyone to split up. Knowing the legend of the Iron Castle, he intended to speak with Grand Duke Drago and make an ally of him, so that he

might use the grand duke in his search for Annette. And what a coincidence! The girl was actually on the train. When Gorshin lost sight of her he should've sought out Gillian to inform him of such, but he realized his signal whistle would be of no use here. The layout of the train was so vast and complicated the sound would be twisted, reflected, and ultimately absorbed. They were all just children lost in a deep jungle.

Still not knowing how to call up the schematics, Gorshin wandered through the train, walking in silence down corridors so spacious they seemed like halls. And up ahead he saw that man. He was right in the midst of battle. Nearly ten mechanical people surrounded the naked man, some of them blasting him with flames, some hammering him repeatedly with their iron fists, and still others slashing at him with lengthy blades. It looked more like a slaughter than a fight.

However, before Gorshin's eyes one mechanical person after another was destroyed. The man's body seemed capable of rendering all their attacks ineffectual. Muscles and organs smashed, shot, and rent wide closed and regenerated in an instant. Gorshin himself witnessed an eyeball that'd been shot out swiftly returning to its original state. The man used chains with blocks of stone attached as his weapons. But those primitive arms truly demonstrated devilish power. He swung them around—that alone left the mechanical people exploding or belching flames. In less than a minute the man had reduced them all to twisted scrap metal.

After the last of them was destroyed, the man began walking in the same direction Gorshin was headed. Instinctively Gorshin tailed him. The Nobleman got the feeling something decisive awaited them.

After he'd advanced more than a hundred yards, the man swung his right arm to the rear. So great was the speed that even a Noble among Nobles like Gorshin wasn't able to get completely out of the way. The iron chain and block of stone that flew at the Nobleman with supersonic speed took off the right half of his face. Gorshin immediately played dead. Though the Nobleman knew he'd be finished if his foe dealt him a coup de grace, the man just kept on walking. Gorshin of course started following him once again.

After they'd walked another three-quarters of a mile, the door to another car appeared. The man vanished just in front of it. The way he disappeared, it was as

if he'd been swallowed up by another dimension. By the time Gorshin had confirmed that the nearby door, walls, and floor contained no hidden passageway, he was ready to drop from pain and despair.

Someone called out his name. Actually, the Nobleman recognized the pair of figures headed his way.

"Lord Gillian—and Resden?!"

The Noble who'd lured out Barry Dawn and his compatriots and turned them into vampires calmly walked over to Gorshin and asked him what had happened. Once Gorshin had told him everything, Gillian's whole face twisted with delight and he said, "So, D, the Krishken girl, and the grand duke are all here—excellent. I shall rid us of the lot of them."

The trio went over to the door where the naked man had vanished. Gillian seemed to stroke the space lovingly. After doing so for about a minute, he returned to his normal demeanor. Seeing that sweat was forming on the brow of this Noble among Nobles, Gorshin was shocked. Tremendous mental powers were being called into play.

"We may enter. I'm going in."

As Gillian pressed forward, first the end of his right foot vanished, followed by his leg, his torso, and then his face.

"Next—you may pass, Quake," Gillian's voice said from an area of empty space. It had to have come from the naked man's vanishing point.

The rotund man was also swallowed up by thin air.

Gorshin stepped forward, staggering all the while, but at that very moment a gleam of light shot from the empty space to pierce his heart. Knocked back by the force of the impact, he fell to the floor with an iron stake sticking out of his chest.

"B-but why, Lord Gillian?"

His stunned query drew a reply from the empty space.

"The man you were following is a being on the level of the grand duke or myself. The reason your face hasn't returned to normal after all this time,

purebred Noble though you are, is because he did that to you. Against a man such as that, you would be no more than a hindrance. Rest well. Someday we shall meet again in the next world."

A split second before Gorshin turned to dust, the retinas of his decaying eyes were emblazoned with the grinning face of Xeno Gillian poking out of empty space.

II

Unlucky was the only way to describe a person who had twice known fear that reached down to the very pit of their heart. Annette was unquestionably one such person. As the girl was waiting for Pikk and the countess, a gigantic shadow had filled her field of view in a single heartbeat. The next thing she knew, she was back on that same operating table. And the grand duke was looking down at her, just as before. However, this time she had neither Countess Genevieve nor the left hand to aid her.

"What are you doing?" Annette asked, surprising herself with how calmly the query came out. She must've had nerves of steel.

"Experiments," the grand duke replied. Oddly enough, as he looked down at Annette, his eyes were home to a boundless grief.

"I heard about that from Miss Genevieve. She said you performed certain operations here, trying to make a bridge between mankind and the Nobility. But she said they were fearful experiments."

"Indeed."

"How long did this go on?"

"Roughly five thousand years. Would you like to hear how many procedures I performed in that time?"

"No. Were you successful?"

"No," the grand duke responded in a bitter tone.

For no reason in particular Annette felt a sorely missed emotion sweep through her heart. It was compassion.

“As far as I know, there was but a single success. And it wasn’t one of ours.”

“Were your experiments really all that important?” she asked.

“I believed so.”

Annette saw the scalpel that gleamed in the grand duke’s right hand. Sweat poured from every inch of her. Though she thought herself composed, her body trembled faintly. And it seemed unlikely to stop.

“And *the great one* said so, too. There may well be Nobles who would doubt that. I readily pledged my support. Although I never dreamt it would stretch over so many long, cruel years, I’m fine with that. Someday the great one’s ideal will be realized. The humans subjected to these experiments were glorious stepping stones, I thought.”

Annette let out a scream. His scalpel had flashed into action. Flesh split open and bright blood gushed from a wound that seemed to smile.

“After five thousand years of this, however, I realized that every time I performed an operation I injured myself,” the grand duke said, taking the scalpel away from his gore-spattered throat. “I immediately knew the cause. When it dawned on me that I empathized with the humans, I considered destroying myself. It was Genevieve who stopped me. She told me that if I were to die then, no one would be saved. And so we began again. Believing in tomorrow. Even if it was a tomorrow that might never come.”

“You poor man,” Annette murmured, shocking herself. She actually meant those words. “Your experiments ultimately failed, didn’t they?”

“Correct,” the grand duke said, tightening his fist and his grip on the scalpel, but he quickly shook his head in denial. “Though we failed, next time will be different. Someday our experiments and the hopes of the dead will bear fruit. Toward that end, young lady, I have need of you.”

“Don’t . . .”

The grand duke was changing right before Annette’s eyes. All the color drained from him, and as his eyes filled with an evil gleam they gave off blood light.

“Forgive me, Annette. I apologize to you, and to your family. And I swear that once our aim is accomplished, I will compensate all of you for the fear and grief you suffered by offering up myself to the very next dawn. Forgive me. Please, make me stop, Genevieve.”

In a hand plagued by the past, the scalpel rose. Its blade no longer gleamed. On account of the blood that clung to it.

The grand duke cried out, “Do not interfere, Pomerolo!”

Drago spun around and his scalpel flew, not only piercing the figure who’d just stepped into the room right between the eyes but exploding through the back of his head to imbed itself in the wall behind him.

The man extended his right hand toward the grand duke and muttered something. With his first step the wound to the back of his head closed, and by the second it was gone completely.

“Do you resent me, Pomerolo? There was but one step to go. In your case, we were just one step shy! But being short that one step, it was failure all the same. Curse me. Hate me if it please you. But do not interfere.”

“Ah, but *I* must interfere,” declared a youthful voice that hadn’t been heard before, echoing through the nightmarish room. Even before the grand duke could turn his eyes to the entrance, the second intruder was primping his copper hair.

“I shall be taking the girl. Grand Duke, feel free to continue this nonsensical contrition for your foolish experiments in the past for so long as you like.”

“And just who are you?” asked the gigantic Noble.

“My apologies—Xeno Gillian is the name. I have returned to this world for the first time in ages.”

“The Xeno clan I am familiar with. As I am with the name of the grand duke’s poor excuse for an heir. What business have you with the girl?”

“A small matter—but one for which there can be no substitute. Might I trouble you to hand her over?”

“Your request is denied. You would do well to remember your station, stripling.”

“If you were an actual Noble I would. However, I owe no niceties to a specter from the past. I am taking the girl. You may remain in the company of this other creature of antiquity.”

As Gillian said that, his right arm swept in the direction of the “failure,” who stood there as if rooted. A dagger flew through the air with searing speed, and the power of a Noble knocked the naked man back a good fifteen feet. Undoubtedly Gillian had taken very clear aim. When the man went flying, the grand duke was directly in his path. The two of them collided with the operating table.

As the grand duke prepared to rise again, a pair of hands clamped down on his shoulders—those of Pomerolo. Lifting the gigantic seven-hundred-pound figure as if he were nothing, Pomerolo hurled the Noble. Gillian was directly in the line of fire.

Gillian was just about to step to the side when something as thick as a tree trunk caught him in the throat. The grand duke's arm. The younger Nobleman was knocked all the way back to the door, where he slammed into the wall before stopping.

Once he'd swiftly gotten to his feet again, Gillian saw the grand duke draw the sword he wore on his hip. The enchanted sword Blue Blood—the wrath of the dead trapped in its blade would drain the blood and the life from any it touched.

The giant had drawn and struck in a single motion, and Gillian's blade parried the blow. But the young Nobleman's eyes went wide. He could sense *something* within his body being taken from him. Reeling, Gillian leaned against a nearby control console for support. Both his hands and face were red. Blood gushed from his pores. Was it regret at having recklessly challenged a legendary Greater Noble to battle that flickered across his face? No, as beads of blood covered his face, Gillian grinned.

"Quake," he called over to his servant, "you know what to do, I take it?"

And that being said, he adjusted his grip on his longsword. A second blow from Blue Blood rained down against it. The instant Gillian parried it a bloody mist engulfed both men.

"You bastard—how in hell's name did you manage that?" groaned the grand duke. For he'd felt all of his own blood being drawn out as well, strange as that seemed.

"Whenever an opponent touches me, not only directly but even with something they hold, their special abilities flow into me. Grand Duke, you're going to be slain by your own power."

Gillian's eyebrow arched as if he'd suddenly thought of something. That was followed by his lips turning up in a grin, and his fangs showing themselves.

He aired his idea, saying, "I shall inherit this train of yours and its experiments. Only the experiments will take on a new form."

The giant howled. Blue Blood flashed out, and every time Gillian parried it the two of them were clouded in vermilion. After a number of these blocked blows, Gillian was nearly tripping over his own feet. When fighting under identical

conditions, the one with the greater strength would prevail in the end. And the grand duke was Gillian's superior in both energy and brute strength.

Parrying a horizontal slash, Gillian could take no more and backed away, calling out, "Quake!"

The man had been waiting off to one side, and that gigantic meatball body of his became a blur. The weights he wore from the waist up shook wildly. The floor rippled and the ceiling twisted. The ultra-powerful shockwaves Quake Resden gave off could take the flesh off a human's bones.

The grand duke's gigantic form was thrown horribly off balance. As Drago spread his arms to either side and planted his feet, Gillian charged straight at his chest. His blade pierced the left side of the grand duke's chest, poking all the way out of his back.

"Genevieve," the giant murmured softly, planting his beloved sword in the floor and leaning on it. "Now I will finally be released."

And then he became a huge mound of ash.

"That settles that," Gillian said, and as he regained his balance on the still-quaking floor, waves of excitement swept through his body. He pictured himself glowering out from the train as it sped through the world of darkness. He would travel the world on this train. From every land he'd take lovely young women and drink them dry.

"But first—" Gillian began, finally with a chance to recall his initial goal. He turned his eyes to the fallen operating table. "What?!" he gasped.

Aside from the surgical implements scattered around the table, there was nothing to be seen on the floor. No, that wasn't true. There was one person. Pomerolo was in the process of heading straight for Gillian. A "failure" who lived only for slaughter—was that the shape of the future for humanity and Nobility alike?

Gillian's sword rose.

Just then the door opened. As they turned to look in that direction, both Gillian and the "failure" froze. The newest intruder was that striking.

“So, you made it all this way, D,” Gillian said with a smile. “It would seem it’s the risen grand duke you seek, but I have slain him. Your usefulness thus at its end, here you shall die, Hunter.”

D’s ears caught a base growl. It was Pomerolo. The man’s expression had changed. His eyes gave off a red glow, and he exposed a pair of hitherto unseen fangs, making clear his murderous intent. But more incredible than anything were the flames of malice that scorched him from head to toe. The unbalanced “failure” had finally found an opponent worth defeating.

“An acquaintance of yours, D?” Gillian inquired, understandably furrowing his brow. Gazing at D, he continued, “No, it would seem not. That being the case, why should he hate you so? Could it be you bear a striking resemblance to a man who did terrible things to him?”

Pomerolo charged forward. Knocking everything out of his path, he closed to fifteen feet, then swung his arms. The chains and their blocks of stone arced through the air like ropes to assail the Hunter from both above and below. And D seemed to glide right between them. Driving his sword through Pomerolo’s heart was actually shockingly easy.

Once D stepped away, Pomerolo staggered, but he quickly stood up straight and strong again. His throat and chest were both free of any trace of wounds.

“An outstanding ‘failure,’ wouldn’t you say, D?” Gillian remarked, his eyes gleaming. “If this is an example of failure, how incredible would a success be, I wonder? I should like to meet one. However, against an opponent who can be run through the heart without dying, your battle will never end. My apologies, D—I’ve decided to aid this creature.”

And as he said that, the Nobleman bounded. Twelve feet high and over twenty feet he sailed. But when he swung his blade low, there was no killing lust behind it.

D didn’t try to evade the blow, but rather parried it. And that was precisely what Gillian had been after. He would absorb all of D’s abilities and use them to slay the Hunter.

“Gaaaah!”

An ear-splitting scream exploded from Gillian's mouth. As the Nobleman practically pried his blade free, his face was covered with horrible wrinkles.

"Such power . . . The energy is . . ."

He was actually weeping.

"Exactly how much—No, that will be enough. It's more than I can handle. Let's settle this, D. Quake!"

The beefy face blurred, and a second shockwave assailed the room. D reeled.

Now! Gillian thought, charging the Hunter. But his foot seemed to catch on something. As the Noble tumbled forward, the Vampire Hunter's blade flashed down at the base of his unprotected neck.

D turned his eyes not to the head that went flying but to the body that collapsed. His left hand appeared down by the Noble's foot, skillfully dashing over to D, making a light bound, and sticking to the end of the Hunter's left arm.

"The grand duke stuck me good, but I played dead and slipped into his pocket. I got Annette out. There's only one of 'em left, so hurry up and take care of him."

The instant the hoarse voice said that, a powerful shudder ran through the entire car. When D turned to look at the source of the tremor, the rotund figure who'd looked to be made of big flesh bags had chunks of meat falling off, his bones were crumbling, and in the blink of an eye he'd been reduced to a pile of dust.

When Quake Resden fought Gillian, he'd died once. Perhaps the massive shockwave just now was his way of bidding farewell to the world before setting off on death's journey with the master who'd granted him a mock life.

A klaxon wailed.

"That ain't good," said the hoarse voice. "Seems the reactor's been nailed. Gotta hightail it out of here, and fast."

"What about the kid?"

"Oh, worried about him, are you? Relax. I told him how to get to the exit and sent him on ahead. What the—?!"

The last part was a cry of astonishment. How long had D known? Countless figures had gathered around Pomerolo and were staring at the Hunter and his hand. Their skin was pale, their eyes charged with lunacy, their limbs twisted, and their bellies trailing innards.

“Test subjects, I take it,” the left hand groaned. “Did they get out with that last jolt, or are they just phantoms? Doesn’t matter either way, I guess. Just let ’em be. They’ve got their own lives to lead—as the living dead, though. Pee-yew! I smell something burning. Hurry up.”

The eye-popping shockwave had hit the desperately fleeing Pikk and Annette as they were making their way down a corridor. Still without a clue as to what’d happened, Pikk got back to his feet, having only banged his right shoulder on the wall.

“Holy shit!” he exclaimed, and it was a wonder his heart didn’t stop dead.

The countess lay on the floor, and to her left an iron girder about twenty feet long had apparently fallen. The problem was, Annette’s upper body was sticking out from under it.

“A-are you all right?!”

The pain of his shoulder forgotten, the boy raced over, and a pale face smiled up at him.

“Can you pull yourself free?” he asked Annette.

“No, it’s no use. It won’t budge an inch, and my legs are pinned. It hurts!”

The boy grabbed hold of the girder and tugged, but naturally it wouldn’t move at all.

“Hang in there. I’m gonna go get D.”

“By then it will be too late,” said the countess.

“What?”

The boy turned to see the Noblewoman pinned under iron pipes. From the waist down she’d been completely crushed. It was a wonder she was even still alive.

“There, down the corridor. See for yourself.”

Following her gaze, Pikk went pale. Figures beyond numbering were pouring down the passageway. Like a needle, memory pricked at Pikk’s brain.

“Th-th-those are . . .” he stammered.

“They are the ones you glimpsed in the basement. It would seem they escaped with the aid of that shock. These are creatures without an iota of thought, and they live solely to destroy!”

“And it was you guys made ’em that way, wasn’t it?”

The countess fell silent, but she soon continued, “A fine mess this is. I no longer have my strength. At this rate, the girl and I will both be torn to ribbons.”

“What should I do? Damn it all!”

“Run for it, Pikk!” Annette shouted. Her voice was a performance in fear. “If you don’t, you’ll be killed too. Thanks for everything you’ve done for me. You’ve done more than enough. Now you have to think about yourself. Okay?”

“You’ve gotta be kidding me. You expect me to run off like a pansy after coming all this way? No man—hell, nobody human could do that.”

“Please, flee,” the countess said, her words practically an indictment. “Strive as you like, but you will accomplish nothing here. As the young lady said, you’ll meet a pointless death. At least let us see you go free.”

There were approaching footsteps. One person, two—ten, then twenty . . .

Pikk fell silent. He was weighing a thought he had. His face grew pale from the staggering nature of that notion.

“Pikk . . .” Annette said, and she saw the boy look up. Such a sad face he wore, but also such a proud one.

“Nope,” the boy said, giving her a manly smile. “There’s only one way outta this!”

When D arrived on the scene, what he saw there were *corpses* beyond numbering, with Annette lying in a spot a short distance away.

“What about the other two?” the Hunter asked.

“They left,” Annette replied, tears glistening in her eyes. “He got me out from under that girder and pulled Genevieve from the wreckage, then took care of all those things. They told me if I stayed here you’d be along, and with that they left.”

D looked down the corridor.

The boy had moved a girder to save the girl. There was no way he’d be able to do that. He needed more than human strength. And by her side—there was the Noblewoman. There was something he could do. Only one play.

From the depths of the corridor there flowed a doleful melody. Was it a serenade they played?

Thirty feet away there was an emergency exit. Opening the door, the Hunter found a familiar face smiling sheepishly. It was Hiki. His wiry frame was wrapped in a thin membrane. He was an unlikely person in an unlikely place. It knocked the breath right out of Annette.

“What are you doing?” D inquired.

“Actually, I’ve been trailing the train a good while now. I was looking in through one of the windows, and I just happened to catch the most unbelievable scene. I suppose all my colleagues bit the dust, right? All seems pretty pointless now. I’m throwing in the towel on this one. Grab ahold of my hands. This train’s in a bad way!”

“First things first—it’s convenient you happened to be here,” the hoarse voice said.

Grinning, Hiki replied, “Well, when I poked my head in a little while ago, I happened to run into the little guy. That’s when he told me to come here . . . you know, now he’s a—”

“Go,” D ordered.

Several seconds later, the three of them were down on the ground watching the vehicle race away. It could no longer be described as a black shape. Flames and pale sparks shot from it in a number of places, making it look like a colossal beast covered with wounds.

“I wonder where they’ll go,” Annette murmured as if in a daze, but no one answered her. “Just suppose . . . if the two of them put the fire out, would they live on the train forever?”

“Could be,” the hoarse voice replied. “You know what they say: *Home is where you hang your hat.* The kid’s got guts. Maybe someday he’ll start some new experiments.”

Now outlined in flames, the train was dwindling on the horizon. Apparently it was headed east. The sky there was beginning to shine with stark light.

“The boy kept his promise,” D said suddenly.

Hiki nodded.

“But I didn’t ask him for—” Annette began, wiping at her tears.

“Not a promise to you. One he made to himself.” After a short pause, the Hunter continued, “He said he wanted to become a Hunter.”

D touched his left hand to the brim of his traveler’s hat as if bidding a gentle farewell. A few minutes later when the morning sun shone sleepily on the spot, the three of them were nowhere to be seen.

the end

Postscript

This Vampire Hunter D novel was a first for me. Before it became a book, it was made available as part of a company's digital content. It was intended for cell phone users. While it was being serialized I didn't receive any feedback at all from readers through the person overseeing it, so I had no idea whether or not it was popular as I just kept on writing. It may be because of the medium that it ended up being over five hundred handwritten pages in length.

Time marches on, and now when a book comes out in paper form, an electronic version is sure to be released simultaneously. In the American market, the Vampire Hunter D books are also released in two forms . . . and though I love paper books, unfortunately, the electronic version performs far better. Going down to the bookstore and not only finding the volume you were looking for but also flipping through books and magazines of other genres was a pleasant way to while away the time . . . but I suppose that era has passed. Press a single key on your PC, and whatever you want will arrive the next day . . . compared to the convenience of that, a round trip to the bookstore may seem bothersome and irrational, but I kind of miss it.

Due to the way it was produced, *D—Throng of Heretics* put me into a different flow of writing. Tracing back through my faint memories, I recall that the set number of lines each time wasn't that great, of course. However, I wrote every single day, without a break, until I finally had it done. I would send them a few days' work at a time, during which time I'd work on other writing, but since the volume wasn't all that great I'd quickly forget about the next batch. And then the next few days would fly by. Normally I just write a new book from start to finish, so some days I can do dozens of pages, and other times I'll go ten days and only get a single page done, but it doesn't matter as long as I make the deadline. However, when every day was a deadline, there were times I'd realize I had only an hour left. And depending on my physical condition or my mood that day the book could be completely different, since I was in a position where I absolutely had to write a few pages every day.

While writing *D—Throng of Heretics*, I felt like something was chasing after me. As I recall, I somehow managed to finish on schedule. I suppose I should've shouted, *Hurray!* I haven't had an experience like it since, but after years of

writing novels the same way, I sometimes miss the way I worked on *D—Throng of Heretics*.

Hideyuki Kikuchi

April 18, 2016, in the middle of the night

While watching *Vampire Hunter D* on DVD

And now, a preview of the next book in the
Vampire Hunter D series

Vampire Hunter D

Volume 25

Undead Island

Written by
Hideyuki Kikuchi

Illustrations by
Yoshitaka Amano

English translation by
Kevin Leahy

Coming in February 2017 from Dark Horse Books

ISLAND IN A SEA OF FOG

chapter 1

I

Meg was taking a break on top of a cliff that overlooked the sea and the entire village. The thought of the chicken pot pie she'd bought in the town of Piercenun along with heavy-duty hooks and lines made her stomach rumble. If Toma could've heard it, he'd have asked her to break up for sure. Just below the sixty-foot-high cliff lay the "god wood," and beyond that was the village. The houses on the beach she'd been looking down at for seventeen years were, to this girl with her heart full of the springtime of youth, almost frustratingly unchanged. Still, the cramped bay and tiny boats in the distance set against this backdrop of sea and sky couldn't help but make Meg's heart quiver with emotion—even if she felt like a sucker all the while.

It was a clear, cloudless day, the sunlight-studded sea truly losing its borders until it too seemed a part of the heavens. However. There was just one thing. One black point that seemed to be a sarcastic god's way of saying, *Nothing in this world is perfect.* The scene touched her heart so deeply as she sat on the cliff not because of the panoramic view but *in spite of it*, Meg thought, occasionally frightened by the workings of her own mind.

Boldly taking a seat on the edge of the cliff, Meg looked down on the sea and the sky, where a kitten-like cloud had formed, as she pulled the chicken pot pie from its tin wrapping. Clearing her throat, she turned her eyes back to the sea and sky. They were changing.

"Huh. What's that?" she said somewhat fearfully, yet she still managed to bite into her lunch, as she was still a growing girl. As she chewed in mute amazement, something from the distant horizon came swiftly creeping toward the beach. The azure and ultramarine that filled Meg's field of view were becoming a different hue. The white of fog.

Meg wrapped her arms around herself. A trembling was rising from the very

marrow of her bones. And she believed it wouldn't stop until the fog had cleared again. She knew the reason.

"It's coming from the island."

Meg didn't say anything more. It was too dreadful to put into words. But in her head, like the applause that followed the climax of a play by the regional thespians, a number of words were already running around. *It's from Undead Island.*

"In the old days, we got the fog a lot," a pale-faced man said in a tone so strained the words seemed to have been extracted by torture. He was very old, with white hair and a hoary beard. Though he was stooped over and needed a metal cane to walk, his eyes had a gleam that said he burned with a vitality all his years couldn't hide. Perhaps it was fueled by fear.

The old man was at the west end of a stone embankment that enclosed the narrow bay, and behind him close to ten more people stood in the light of the sun. From the badges on their chests it was clear that three of them were the sheriff and his deputies, and of the other five behind them, one was a girl who from the looks of her garb was either from this village or another nearby. The rest were men who, even as they beheld this scene like a paean to the life-giving powers of sun and water, had a lingering and ill-suited air of blood and murderous thoughts about them. Any Frontier resident over the age of three could immediately tell what they were. Bounty hunters.

"The men of this village were called 'wave braves.' It means they're people of courage who don't fear the sea." The pale old man's faltering voice had a mysterious power that couldn't be attributed to failing memory as it flowed through the group. "The seas might be rough, whirlpools churning or lightning splitting the sky, but these are men who'd think nothing about heading out in a battered old boat if need be. But that fog—the fog from the island—made men like that bolt the doors to their houses, put out the lights, and hold their breath. The fog from Undead Island—even now, nobody rightly knows what it is."

"Okay, that's enough of the 'nobody knows' foreplay," said a tough and determined man that anyone would've taken at a glance as the leader of the badge-wearing contingent. Once the old man's story broke off, the lawman left

some breathing room before he said to him, “We’ve put up with that all the way here from your house. Now spill it. Back in the day, what happened when the fog came rolling in? You said it wasn’t like the situation we’ve got now. So, how was it, then?”

A sort of tension sprang up around the old man. Invisible to the eye, it was the concentrated attention of the girl and the quartet of bounty hunters.

“Every time the fog showed up, everyone turned into Nobles.”

The girl alone gasped, while the battle-hardened men showed no change at all. Rumors about Undead Island had spread quite far across the Frontier. Turned into Nobles—the horrifying import of those words was clear to the old-timer as he said that. Fog pressed in from the sea one night to turn everything milky white, a few villagers got pairs of raw, swollen teeth marks on the nape of their necks, and then they in turn sought the blood of their family and neighbors.

“In the seventy-two years I spent in the village,” the old man continued, “the fog hit us three times. And every time, a couple of people would go after their families for blood, and them and all those they bit got stakes through their hearts. And the only reason we managed to slay the predators in fog so thick we could barely see our hands in front of our own faces is because, aside from the first few people turned into Nobles, those drained of blood only became Nobility the night after they joined the dead, and the fog’s incursion ended quickly enough. When we got the second wave of it, five folks total turned into Nobles first. Four of them were put down soon as the fog cleared, but the last one escaped into the sea.”

On hearing that, the sheriff was just about to shout, “Hold it right there!” However, it was actually one of the bounty hunters who spoke up, a giant of a man even more powerfully built than the sheriff and as hirsute as the old man—only in his case the whiskers were jet black. His name was Garigon.

“Hold it right there, Mister Former Mayor. Freshwater or salt, I thought Nobles and those they’ve turned weren’t supposed to be able to cross running water.”

“Me and the four villagers I was with all saw the man swimming out to sea by the light of the moon. Ever since, we haven’t put any stock in the legends about running water.”

“So, did that fella head off to Undead Island?”

“I don’t know. No one was about to follow him.”

“And did the fog really come from the island?”

The old man nodded. “Back before I was even born, and I’m talking more than a hundred years ago, there was a bunch of villagers who went out to the island to see if maybe folks could live there. Their report was pretty surprising. When they came back, they said that setting aside the facilities left by the Nobility, Undead Island could be called a paradise on earth, filled with plants and animals, the sea around it a treasure trove of fish and shellfish, and with all the fowl you’d care to shoot. But what whipped the village up more than anything was the way they said soil out on the island was real well suited to farming. As you can see, mountains border the village on three sides, so they’ve only fishing to rely on for their daily bread. Now the men might’ve been too proud, but the women they left tending the homes wanted a life of working the unshaking soil instead of an existence on a sea that’ll turn wild at the drop of a hat. Less than two weeks after the survey party came back, seven families from the village—thirty people, all told—decided to cross the sea and take up permanent residence on the island.”

“On Undead Island?” one of the sheriff’s deputies murmured. Although the head lawman and his two underlings wore standard-issue gun belts, the hands poised to reach for their weapons all trembled faintly.

In contrast to that, the bounty hunters actually seemed to be enjoying the old man’s tale, and the youngest of them—a boy who still looked to be in his late teens—was twanging the short bow he had under his left arm as he said, “I never heard this story before. Now things are getting interesting. You know, I’ve heard a lot of talk about Undead Island, but it’s always kinda fuzzy on the details. Is there really one of the Nobility’s spaceports out there on the island?”

“There’s something like that. Only it seems not a single soul from the survey party or the settlers who came later ever set foot inside it. All there ever was on that facility were reports about the outward appearances. Based on those, it seems it wasn’t a spaceport. But then with the Nobility, you never can tell.”

“Hmm. Back then the fog didn’t roll in, I take it.”

If it had, and the results had been similar to the present situation, there probably wouldn't have been any talk of establishing a settlement.

The old person confirmed this with a nod, saying, "Not that I've heard."

"What happened to all those settlers, then? Did they pull up stakes and come back?"

It took a while for the old man to respond.

"They're still out on the island."

"Meaning what—they got wiped out?" asked the third bounty hunter. In his right hand he gripped an eighteen-inch short spear.

The old man shook his head. Two expressions occupied the deeply wrinkled face weathered by wave and wind and sun: fear and a smile.

"Seems they're not dead," he said.

"What do you mean by that?" This question came from Garigon's lips.

"You see, the first time the fog hit, one of the Nobles who attacked the village had been part of that group of settlers."

II

When the old man said "Noble," he wasn't talking about their station. This was a term of derision cast on all their ilk—including humans who'd been turned into bloodsuckers. What the old man was telling them was that the Noble who attacked the desolate little fishing village under cover of fog that first time was a *former* villager.

"That place's been called Undead Island since long, long before the village was built. But we didn't really feel it in our hearts until that second down on the beach when the fog cleared and flames from our torches showed us the face of one of our own. See, that first fog had come exactly a day after we lost regular communication with the settlers."

"Had the Nobility risen again?" the fourth bounty hunter inquired, his lips seeming to curl in amusement. White teeth gleamed in a suntanned face. A repeating rifle was slung over his shoulder.

“That’s all we could think of. The day after that first fog, the village banned all passage over to the island. Just the same, a number of folks with blood ties to the settlers broke the ban and sailed out, but not one of them ever came back.”

Only those unfamiliar with the Frontier and the Nobility would be foolish enough to label that travel ban cruel. Even now, with the Nobility in extreme decline, the fear of them remained a deep black stain on the brains of the populace.

“But why did the Nobility come back all of a sudden?”

Garigon’s query might’ve been directed at himself, yet the rest of them unconsciously focused their gaze on the old man once more.

“No way to know that without crossing over to the island,” the former mayor said, his reply carrying a terrible resignation and weariness.

Even these rough men who’d left mountains of corpses and spilled rivers of blood were momentarily left speechless.

After that brutal silence, the sheriff finally said, “That’s why we’re here. Could we trouble you to set us up with a boat?”

The old man shook his head from side to side.

“Boats are a fisherman’s life. I can’t let somebody else just take one out. Not even if the owner’s gone now.”

The lawman was at a loss.

“Supposing you were to take one out,” the old man continued, “the area around Undead Island’s still notorious for all the accidents where you get these three different currents colliding. I’ve been putting out to sea since I was all of three, and my father and his father both warned me about getting anywhere near there. Truth is, I nearly died out there twice. No way on earth you can do it without somebody from the village along.”

“We were hoping you could help us out there. Yesterday, as soon as Meg here notified me and we had confirmation of the situation in the village, I immediately got in touch with anyone in the nearby towns or villages who hails from this village. No one but you would even hear me out. Now, I realize coming out here

wasn't easy for you. Chalk it up to shit luck if you must, but give us a little help here."

"You're talking to a man who turned his back on this village. After forty years serving as mayor, all of sudden I couldn't take any of it anymore. Not living in poverty, not the raging sea, not a miserable little village that only survived by the grace of God. Sheriff, you think anybody'd be happy with a man who ran off and abandoned his own family dragging his sorry ass back here and letting other folks use their boats? For starters, I won't allow myself to do it!"

Though the old man's tone was one of complete exhaustion, it was underpinned with a will of iron.

"Damn, but this is the strangest thing," Garigon said, twisting his body around so he could look back at the village behind them. "More than a hundred villagers, from little babies up to grannies and grandpappies, all disappearing in a single night."

Everyone had already turned in the same direction. Before them, houses of wood and plastic sat in unsettling stillness in the midday sun. Two days earlier, fog had crossed the sea in the afternoon, and apparently someone within it had taken everyone away. When the sheriff and others raced there the next morning, they found not a single soul—a village so dead, in fact, there was no sign of so much as a dog or cat.

"Meg," the sheriff called out, and the girl turned to face him. "I know we've been over this time and again, but is that really what you saw—every last person from the village walking out to sea on top of the water, headed out to Undead Island?"

The lawman had a stern look in his eye that told her he wouldn't hear any lies, and the girl nodded to him, but just then a dazed look surfaced on her face. Ever since witnessing the coming of the fog she'd done her level best not to let fear get the better of her, but the threads of willpower steadying her had suddenly been snipped, throwing them into disarray. The change was so great the sheriff himself twisted around for a look to the left—staring off at the cliffs towering over the other end of the bay some fifty yards distant. What Meg saw should've been there. But there was no one. And none of the others seemed to have seen

it. However, when Meg took another look, all she could think was that some sort of incredible being had been there. Something that could raise her fear-fraught psyche in rapture.

“I saw,” Meg said, nodding absentmindedly. The reply seemed to come from a husk robbed not only of its mind but of its very soul. “I saw a really gorgeous man.”

Meg had left the town of Piercenun about noon and run into the sheriff’s office all pale-faced that same evening. A one-way trip between Meg’s village and the town of Piercenun would take a girl like her an hour and a half on foot. Apparently the girl had run the whole way, and according to her wheezing, breathless tale—

Tearing down the stone steps from the cliff toward the fog-shrouded village, Meg headed toward her house without the slightest hesitation. Though she was well acquainted with the strange and terrible occurrences connected to the fog, that only helped her concern for her family and the desire to save them claw their way to the surface.

The village was already choked with thick white fog, but Meg managed to discern the shadowy forms of houses a few yards ahead of her. Relying 70 percent on her eyesight and the other 30 on instinct, she headed for the center of the village—a grocery store called Gass’s Place that was fifty or sixty feet from the bay. But when the girl got there, the door was open.

“Huh?” she said, the word escaping in her surprise.

The ironclad rule was that when fog came in from the sea, you shut your doors and didn’t open them even if it was your own family outside.

Standing in front of the shop was the proprietor, Gass Kemp. And it wasn’t just him. His wife, son, both daughters, and even his bedridden grandmother all appeared, one after another, lining up right beside him. Meg got the feeling there was some invisible drill instructor right by them.

The grocer and his family quickly set out on foot toward the bay. Following them with her eyes, Meg was rooted in place. Something black took hazy shape in the depths of the fog, and by the time she realized they were people they’d closed to within a few yards. Meg was so scared she was ready to shut her eyes,

but they passed right in front of her as they walked toward the bay, just as Gass and his family had done.

“Auntie Mabel . . .” the girl murmured.

Passing by was an old woman who lived alone now that all her kin were dead, and the community looked after her.

“The Kapsch family . . .”

The father, Nodd, was at the fore, leading a quintet of the village’s most accomplished fishermen.

“Mr. Ulmer . . .”

He was the most important person in the village—their shipwright, who would be ninety this year.

“Miriam Hardy . . .”

A month ago the young blonde had been widowed when she lost her husband in a storm, but they said she’d be married again inside of a month. Every bachelor in town had his sights set on her.

All of them were walking toward the bay. Meg stood stock still, unable to do anything, but not one of them turned so much as a vacant eye in her direction.

“What’s going on? Is something waiting for them there? Is this what happened to the people long ago?”

Meg took a deep breath. She’d finally remembered her family.

“Dad? Mom? Ida?!”

She ran like a woman possessed. It was a minor miracle that she didn’t get lost or trip even once. There was no saying how many people she passed. The only thing that was clear was that everyone in the village was headed in the same direction.

The village was built on stony terraces like the rice fields of mountainous Asia, with the bottom-most tier reaching down to the beach. The houses were connected to one another by stone steps. Meg’s house was on the third tier. She crept into the place, but quickly realized nobody was there. Still, she couldn’t

help running through each and every room.

When Meg left the house, she was crying in spite of herself. All she had to rely on was the spear gun she carried—one belonging to her father. Though it was the spring-powered type, it was quite powerful, with just as much force as the gas-propelled ones rich people used. Come what may, the girl was going to bring her family back—that determination burned like a fire in her, though she felt like someone was whispering to her that it was no use.

Three minutes of running down cobblestone streets brought the girl to the bay. She pushed her way through the fog, which was still clinging to her when she arrived, at which point she murmured, “I’m too late.”

There was no sign of anyone.

Meg climbed up on the breakwater and ran. Going all the way down to the end, she peered out to sea. Shadowy figures melted into view. Beyond the bay was no shallow shoal. It was more than thirty feet deep out there. Yet the figures were walking across the surface. Meg could only watch in astonishment as they went, and in less than two seconds’ time they’d vanished.

And then—with a feeling like the fog surrounding her suddenly carried a chill that reached down to the marrow of her bones, Meg forgot herself, dashing down the road that led from the village to the highway.

On receiving notification, the sheriff immediately had two of his three deputies speed to the village, and as the messenger pigeon they dispatched reported that the place remained shrouded in fog, they were ordered not to enter the village. The lawman had then fallen into serious meditation. For he was not without considerable knowledge about the fog that struck from the sea. Though he embraced all the suspicion that came with his line of work, the sheriff believed everything Meg had told him. He was certain the villagers had walked off across the sea. And he was equally certain of their destination. Based on that conviction, it probably took him less than a minute to decide his next course of action, because he’d known that someday this would come to pass and had given the response to the situation consideration on more than one occasion. They were thoughts that’d soon faded from his mind, but now that speculation had become reality, the sheriff was quite proud of himself for not being taken by

surprise.

His plans were predicated on first crossing over to the island. To do that, they'd need a good number of people. And since something weird was going on with the island, amateurs like the townsfolk and fishermen were excluded from the fight. Because the Nobility were undoubtedly involved.

The sheriff ordered his remaining deputy to go around town and talk to all the roughest customers, he had signs put up guaranteeing a flat wage of ten thousand dalas, and he ran the emergency siren before sending out messenger pigeons with the same information to be disseminated to every town and village within a day's ride. That night nearly a hundred confident souls had called on his office, but on hearing the details they turned right around, one after another, until only four remained the following morning. Now they stood shoulder to shoulder with the sheriff on the breakwater.

As far as the sheriff was concerned, the one saving grace was that the former mayor of Meg's village had left there, and for the past year he'd been living with a daughter who'd married into a family in Piercenun. At the sheriff's request the old man had straightened up his troubled back and clambered onto a cyborg horse.

"Well, this is a fine hole in our plans. We got nobody to take the helm!"

Garigon's complaint was greeted by silence. So long as the former mayor objected, these warriors couldn't cross over to the field of battle.

It was the youngest of the bounty hunters who shattered the oppressive air, saying, "Leave it to me. I was born in a fishing town. My rowing ain't half bad!"

"How old are you?" asked the former mayor.

"Huh? How old do I look?"

"And how old were you when you left your hometown?"

"Let's see—seven."

"You been across the brine since?"

The young man shrugged his shoulders.

"I can't give the helm to a seven-year-old. Just accept it."

“So, what the hell are we supposed to do, then?”

The sound of waves was the only answer to the agitated boy’s query.

The solution came from a most unexpected source.

“I’ll do it,” said the girl.

III

“Hey! No freaking way!”

“You should’ve said that before we left.”

While Meg was at the stern expertly working the rudder, the young deputy had a strange look in his eye as he stared at her arms, to say nothing of the waist and legs that supported her and seemed several times stronger than they’d appeared on dry land.

At any rate, with the half dozen men also aboard, the small craft was nimbly cutting across the waves, at times with the current and at others against it. If it were a person, you’d say it had a nice steady gait.

Stunned by the girl’s ridiculous proposal, the sheriff had asked if she could even row, to which Meg replied she’d been putting to sea and helping her father with his fishing since the age of seven. Even now she was confident she was better than boys her age. The sheriff had shaken his head and said no to taking a woman along, but Garigon had suggested they could send her back as soon as they reached the island. Meg was the very first to support him. Just to be clear on the matter, the lawman asked her if she swore to do it, and naturally the girl replied in the affirmative. In truth, she had no intention whatsoever of going back. Her parents and her little sister had gone off to an island where the Nobility roamed, after all.

In addition to the men, the boat was packed with food and water enough for two days and medicine, and two hours later the small craft headed out into the bay with the water almost up to its gunwales. The elderly deputy who’d been left behind to carry word back to Piercenun soon faded from view.

When the mainland vanished an hour out, even the sheriff thought anxiously that these currents were incredible. The boat was borne on a current reaching

speeds of twenty knots. And a girl of seventeen was not only challenging that current, she was mastering it. It was small wonder that the young deputy couldn't help but let his honest impression slip out.

"We'll be there in another thirty minutes," said the girl. "Your weapons and head good to go?"

"More or less," a youthful face replied with a sigh, giving Meg a long look and a smile.

The reason she'd asked was because she was thinking to herself, *Will this kid be able to hold his own on an island with Nobles?*

"I'm Meg. And you are?"

No sooner had she asked that than the sheriff, standing at the prow, called out, "Wesley! We're within sight of the island. Don't forget to prep for our landing, now."

"Yes, sir."

"Wesley."

Once again his name had been called. This time it was Meg.

"You look a lot like the sheriff," she continued. "Is he by any chance—"

"My father," he said, nearly spitting the words.

"Oh, really. So, you're following in your dad's footsteps? Aren't you the dutiful son."

"I'm not a deputy by choice. See, he was shorthanded." There was no hostility in Wesley's answer because Meg's tone had been entirely sincere. Getting up, he turned his gaze forward to find a little hump of an island on the horizon. "Undead Island?"

The fear and horror the boy's voice carried made Meg tense up. Soon they'd be dealing with the Nobility, those who'd once been their victims, or their descendants.

Just then, the youngest bounty hunter deftly made his way across the rocking boat to the pair. Making no attempt to hide his vulgar smirk he said, "My, aren't

the two of you chummy. Can I be your friend, too?" He couldn't have been any older than Wesley.

"Not a chance," Meg said flatly.

"Oh, why not?" he asked with feigned ignorance, but his eyes shone with a dangerous gleam.

"Because ever since you got to the village you haven't taken your eyes off my boobs and butt. You're such a pig."

As Meg had reprimanded him loudly and without a hint of restraint, the bounty hunters in the middle of the craft let out delighted whoops. The young man's face flushed crimson and murderous intent filled him from head to toe. For those who lived on the field of battle, a public tongue-lashing could be considered the greatest insult. If they couldn't reassert their honor right there and then, they'd have no leg to stand on the next day. Meg was well aware of that but had been merciless with him nonetheless because he'd had such a lecherous look in his eye. However, the instant Meg saw the young bounty hunter's hand go for the machete on his hip her expression froze. It was no exaggeration to say a killing lust radiated from the young man.

"Knock it off!" Wesley said, standing between the two of them.

"You wanna try stopping me, lover boy?" said the young bounty hunter. "Don't kid yourself. You act like you've never heard of Bo the Bowman before."

That knocked the wind out of Meg. She'd had her suspicions since she first saw his bow, but never would've imagined he was really that young.

They said he could fire an arrow that would punch through a demon bird soaring a thousand yards off the ground, and he was so quick that in a second he'd taken down ten bandits, putting an arrow through the right eye of each. At a range of a hundred yards he'd taken on a hundred charging outlaws mad for blood, slaying the last with just three feet to go and ensuring that his consummate skill was already the stuff of legend. Meg got the impression Wesley and the badge on his chest were swiftly fading away like mist.

But then the girl heard someone say, "Never heard of you." That was Wesley's reply. The young deputy's right hand was going for the pistol on his hip.

“Nice. Fight! Fight!” the bounty hunter nearest the three of them chanted, pounding the butt of his short spear against the bottom of the boat and getting to his feet. “A bounty hunter and a lawman fighting over a gal? This won’t be done till we’ve seen some blood.”

“Neither of you better pull out,” Garigon added. He was licking his chops.

From the look in their eyes, Wesley didn’t have a prayer of winning. Knowing that, he still held his ground due to the inherent hatred of wrongdoers shared by those on the side of the law.

“Shut your trap!” the bowman snarled. The naked malice in his tone showed he’d played right into his compatriots’ hands.

“Wesley! Bo! Settle down, both of you,” the sheriff commanded from the prow. “This seem like any time to be fighting among ourselves? Bo, anything happens to my deputy and you won’t see a lousy dalas!”

There was no reply. The young man called Bo was so lathered up for a fight there’d be no stopping him now.

The sheriff’s right hand went for his gun—and at the same time, the two bounty hunters gripped their weapons as well. A fight between the young bucks was turning into a proxy war splitting them along job and character lines. It could no longer be averted. Both the sheriff and Meg felt it.

“Huh?!”

A cry of surprise had escaped the sheriff. It was a heartbeat later that not only his form but the entire boat was engulfed by something white billowing up from behind them.

“It’s fog!” Garigon exclaimed, his voice quavering violently.

The sea had suddenly gone mad. Waves bared white fangs and slammed the boat broadside.

“This is some serious shit! Hey! Do something, helmsman!”

“This can’t be,” Meg said, squeezing the words out in what was nearly a scream. “The tides don’t just go nuts like this. No way! It’s been rough, but we’ve managed to get this far because they were running the same as always.”

“Hold on tight, everyone! Fall in the sea and you’re a goner!” the sheriff shouted, his voice, too, shaking badly.

“What the hell is this? The wind ain’t even blowing!”

“And the sun’s shining away like nobody’s business. This ain’t normal stormy weather!”

The seas had erupted madly despite sunny skies and a lack of wind. Swells were reaching ten feet now, and if the fifteen-foot-long craft couldn’t adjust to the changed conditions, it was only a matter of time before it’d be reduced to so much flotsam.

Though she’d experienced rough seas more times than she could count, now waves rose on all sides of the boat, falling on it with the force of some bizarre beast and leaving Meg slumped over the rudder and barely conscious.

The sheriff and the roughnecks could no longer even find voice enough to shout at her. But it didn’t take long for all that to give way to cries of astonishment and delight.

“The fog’s gone!”

“The waves have settled down, too. It’s calm!”

As she felt the pitching and rolling quickly fade, Meg turned her face forward from where she clung to the rudder. Already calmed, the surface glittered in the sunlight, while far off across the water the shape of a tiny boat became visible.

“What’s that?”

As proof that Meg hadn’t been the only one to spot it, someone to the fore called out, “It’s a boat! One a lot smaller than ours. So how’s it going so fast?”

“Manning the helm is—just one person. Some guy in black.”

Meg strained her eyes for all she was worth. *It’s him,* she thought. *It has to be that gorgeous fella I saw up on the cliffs.* However, when her eyes finally focused on the point in question, the little boat and the figure were rapidly pulling away, and they swiftly melted into the vast expanse of sea.

“I don’t believe it. When I spotted him, it was that small. To get that far in less than five minutes . . .”

The sheriff's words sounded like delirium, and in her heart of hearts Meg was shaking her head vehemently. *You say you don't believe it, but that's a lie,* she thought. *He of all people could do it. I mean, just look at how beautiful he is.*

But a voice cut into the girl's rapturous thoughts like the teeth of a beast.

"In that boat just now—was that another bounty hunter?"

"If it is, he's a hell of a good one! Hey, hurry it up, baby. Don't want him getting the jump on us."

"But to be able to work a rudder like that . . . Who the hell is he?"

Seemingly unconcerned with the voices that rose like bubbles to the surface, the sheriff was concentrating on a different question. Those sudden killer waves just now—had they been calmed by the master of the now-vanished boat?

He had no reason to think that. No, actually there was one. Though it was at a great distance and only for a second, the sheriff had seen the face of the man helming the little boat. Not only were his features indistinct, but his very outline had been a blur. Still, the lawman's retinas had been emblazoned with it. That one God-granted instant had been like an eternity. And in it, he had been witness to beauty itself.

To be continued in

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hideyuki Kikuchi was born in Chiba, Japan in 1949. He attended the prestigious Aoyama University and wrote his first novel, *Demon City* (Shinjuku), in 1982. Over the past two decades, Kikuchi has written numerous horror novels, and is one of Japan's leading horror masters, working in the tradition of occidental horror writers like Fritz Leiber, Robert Bloch, H. P. Lovecraft, and Stephen King. As of 2004, there are seventeen novels in his hugely popular ongoing Vampire Hunter D series. Many live-action and anime movies of the 1980s and 1990s have been based on Kikuchi's novels.

ABOUT THE ILLUSTRATOR

Yoshitaka Amano was born in Shizuoka, Japan. He is well known as a manga and anime artist, and is the famed designer for the Final Fantasy game series. Amano took part in designing characters for many of Tatsunoko Productions' greatest cartoons, including *Gatchaman* (released in the U.S. as *G-Force* and *Battle of the Planets*). Amano became a freelancer at the age of thirty and has collaborated with numerous writers, creating nearly twenty illustrated books that have sold millions of copies. Since the late 1990s Amano has worked with several American comics publishers, including DC Comics on the illustrated Sandman novel *Sandman: The Dream Hunters* with Neil Gaiman, and for Marvel Comics on *Elektra and Wolverine: The Redeemer* with best-selling author Greg Rucka.